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A DAUGHTER OF THE EMPIRE

MARY BRADFORD WHITING

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CHAPTER I

CHRIS AND HER FATHER

"DINNER not ready yet?"

Major Strafford spoke in a tone that was distinctly irritable, and the girl whom he addressed lifted her eyebrows and pursed up her lips as if to whistle. They were very pretty lips, and the eyes under the eyebrows were bright and clear as sunny water, while the hair that curled round the broad forehead shone like burnished gold. A smile both proud and tender often dawned on her father's face when he looked at her; but to-day he was tired and depressed and a heavy numbness weighed down his limbs, so that he thought of nothing but the fact that he had told Chris to see that dinner was ready by one, and that though the clock was striking, the cloth was not so much as laid.

"Of course I know that it's not the slightest use to tell you anything!" he snapped out, and so saying he threw down his hat and whip and strode to the door. "Mac!" he shouted, and again, "Mac!"

There was no answer, and Chris stood watching him with a quizzical look.

"Mac!" he called a third time, and a distant

cry of, "Hold hard! I'll be along in a minute!" showed that his summons had been heard. He sank into a low wicker chair, and began to open the letters that had come by the morning's mail.

Chris, meanwhile, went to the sideboard, and taking out a white cloth, began to lay the table with neat, quick fingers, that never once missed their mark; and almost before she had finished, a step was heard in the passage and an appetizing odour announced the approach of dinner.

"Better late than never, I suppose you think, Mac?" remarked Major Strafford in a grim tone, as a gaunt-looking woman entered the room, bearing a dish in one hand and a bread platter in the other.

Her name, as a matter of fact, was Lily Macfarlane, but since it was clearly impossible to associate her with any flower that had ever grown upon the earth, she had been called Mac all her days. Hard-faced and hard-voiced, with scanty wisps of hair twisted into a little button at the back, with a skin like dried parchment and a decided cast in her eye, she would have been plain under any circumstances; but dressed as she was in a short skirt from which all trace of colour had long departed, with a much-worn red flannel shirt, a man's broad felt hat firmly skewered to her head, and a pair of high boots with formidable soles, she was a wonderful object indeed.

To Major Strafford she was worse; she was a perpetual eyesore. Accustomed as he had been to a luxurious home in Sydney, with efficient servants to wait upon him and all the comforts of civilization about him, he was jarred at every moment by his present surroundings; but since servants were practically unknown in the mining township of

Halford's Creek, he was forced to be thankful for even such help as this.

It was soon after his arrival at that desolate place that he had gone up the river on receiving news of a flood, and as he rode up the water-logged district, he saw a horse and rider in difficulties. To go to their rescue was the work of a moment, but it was some time before they could be extricated; and when it was done at last and he discovered that the rider was a woman with a sack containing food slung round her neck, he broke out into a storm of reproaches.

"Suicide! mere suicide to try such a thing!" he exclaimed. "Food for your children? Yes, I dare say, but why didn't you send your husband?"

"I didn't send my husband because he's such a poor mess that he always makes a fool of himself if it's anyway possible," returned the rescued woman shortly. "I'm twice the man with a horse that he is, and well he knows it. I'll just get along now and see to 'em—many thanks, all the same."

She plunged on through the swamp, splashing the water to right and left as she urged her horse along, and Major Strafford had curiosity enough to follow her. Well, indeed, was it that he did so, for the storm had increased during her absence, and a sudden swell of the flood had borne down her wooden shanty, sweeping husband and children away on its waves.

That was an anguish that Major Strafford did not care to look back upon. He could do no less than take the poor distracted creature home with him, and as the woman whom he had brought with him from Sydney to look after his motherless little daughter

was simply aching for a chance of escape from a life that she hated, she was only too delighted to find one in the new-comer's appearing. Nothing should induce her to stay in the house with such a being as that, nothing should even induce her to remain in a house that had been profaned by her presence. It was useless to protest—in vain the Major offered to get rid of the intruder. Her bags had been packed and her place taken on the coach before she said a word; and there Mac had remained ever since—laundrymaid, cook, charwoman, a far better carpenter than the Major and quite as capable with horses; while as a nurse, though her methods might be rough and ready they were splendidly efficient, and she had brought both him and his child safely through many illnesses and accidents. Nothing could daunt her, nothing fatigue her, and once when Chris had been bitten by a snake and her life was despaired of, Mac had worn her hat and boots for a fortnight on end, never going to bed, and only snatching an occasional wink of sleep in a chair in the sick room. But in spite of all her good qualities, Major Strafford could not reconcile himself to her, and it was only the absolute impossibility of getting any one in her place that made him submit to her presence.

Grass and gum trees, gum trees and grass; grey tints deepening into green, green tints fading into grey; scattered patches of scrub, dreary townships like milestones marking the slow advance of civilization—the way that led to Halford Creek was hard to beat for unattractiveness, but there were many who declared that the attractions of the place itself were far less than those of the road that led to it.

Only ten short years before, it had been an uninhabited desert, but the discovery of gold had brought a host of eager miners. Huts were erected, stores were opened, a Warden was appointed to uphold law and order as best he could. Then, as quickly as they had arisen, the fortunes of the place declined. A more generous streak of gold was discovered fifty miles higher up the stream, and the majority of the miners abandoned their claims and departed to seek better luck elsewhere.

But though the majority were gone, there were many who still remained, and Major Strafford was tempted to wish at times that they would follow their mates and leave him in peace. He was as little suited for the post of Warden to a mining community as it was possible for any man to be, but like many other people who have drifted into an unsuitable position, he was unable to get out of it again. His father had come out from the old country when quite a boy, and though he had but little capital to start with, he had managed his affairs so successfully that he had bequeathed a fine stock farm to his two sons at his death. Geoffrey, the younger of the two, had no turn for business, and leaving everything to the elder, he had lived the life of a rich man, racing, yachting and amusing himself during most of the year, but at the same time taking a keen interest in the work of the New South Wales Militia, in which he held a commission.

Then, at last, had come the crash: Edgar Strafford died suddenly, and his death revealed that not only his own share, but his brother's had been swallowed up in a sea of debt and general mismanagement. He had never married and there-

fore he left no one to suffer except his brother and his brother's wife and child, but for them the ruin was complete, and for a time Major Strafford was lost in utter despair.

He was too brave a man not to make an effort to recover himself, and though it cut him to the quick to give up his beautiful home in Sydney and sell his yacht and his horses, he faced the situation with more determination than any of his friends had thought that he possessed. His misfortunes had come to him through no fault of his own, unless he had been at fault in putting so entire a trust in his elder brother, and by the influence of some of those who sympathized with him he was given the post of an Inspector of Police. The salary was not a high one, but he might have managed upon it if Mrs. Strafford's health had not given way, plunging him into fresh anxieties and expenses. Her death was the final blow, and feeling that he had no power to cope with his work, he had let his grip on it relax until the authorities seized upon the establishment of a mining camp at Halford Creek to appoint him to the wardenship. He chafed against the exile and fretted himself over the uncongenial nature of the work, but he knew too well that he had been a failure to ask for any other post, and week after week and month after month he plodded on at his thankless task, trying his best to settle the miners' disputes and to keep what order he could in his district.

It was a strange atmosphere in which to bring up a young and pretty girl, but he had no money with which to send her to school, and he would have been so absolutely and wretchedly lonely without her

that he was thankful that it was out of the question. She had not suffered so much as might have been expected, for he had cared for her manners, Mac had cared for her health, and her education had been attended to by one of the miners who had been a schoolmaster in former days.

"I wonder you didn't go on being a master if schools are such splendid places as all that!" Chris had said one day when John Derrick had been telling her of the delights of English school life; and at the look of bitter pain that flashed across his face, she had set her little white teeth together and told herself passionately that she was a *fool*, a *fool*, a *fool*, to have made such a tactless remark. She did not want to know what had brought him out there, all that mattered to her was that he was her kind and capable instructor; and when her father answered a comment of hers one day on Derrick's white hair and sunken eyes, that it was no wonder he showed the marks of a sentence for forgery, she had stopped him with a stamp of the foot and a strange gust of anger.

"He has come out here to forget, and we ought to help him to do it," she said; and from that day forward there was a touch of gracious deference in her manner towards her tutor that gave her a hitherto unknown charm. She had made rapid progress before, for she was naturally quick and clever, but she made far greater progress now, for her whole heart was in her work, and her acquirements would have put many an English High School girl of her age to shame. But there was this marked difference between Chris and the ordinary English High School girl: she did not look upon her work as important

for its own sake; she had neither examinations to pass nor schoolfellows to compete with, and her studies were to her merely the means of so sharpening her mental qualities that she could use them successfully when her time came to go out into the world.

It was not a usual attitude for a girl of sixteen, but it was an attitude typical of the young and vigorous nation to which she belonged, and it meant a good deal more than Chris realized. She was crude in many of her ideas, self-centred and self-opinionated, but there was that in her which was bound to subdue self in the long run—a spark of shining honour and chivalry which she shared in common with many of her compatriots.

"All aboard!" said Mac, as she slapped a dish of potatoes down upon the table.

It was her original method of announcing that dinner was served, and Major Strafford looked after her with a baleful eye as she stumped out of the room.

"That creature gets on my nerves more and more every day," he groaned, as he threw down his letters and came to the table.

It was a frequent remark on his lips and Chris took no notice of it, but what she did notice was the weary look on his face.

"Don't go out again," she said. "I can see that your head is bad and you ought to lie down and rest."

"Lie down and rest!" he grunted. "Really, Chris, you might be five years old! I asked you to have dinner ready at one, because I have to ride upstream to the North Drayton Reef this afternoon.

There is a bad dispute on with Davis, and I must get to the bottom of it before the miners' meeting this evening."

"And shall you have to go to the meeting?"

She spoke anxiously, for she thought that he looked paler than she had ever yet seen him, but he did not show any gratitude for her concern.

"Of course I shall have to go," he said; "there'll be bad work if I don't! The men hate Davis, as you know, and if they can get their claws into him, they will."

He picked up one of the letters that was still unread, and propping it up before him, let his eyes travel over it as he ate; while Chris sat silent, her look of anxiety deepening as she watched him.

The miners' dislike of Solomon Davis, the stout little broker who bought and sold their shares and disposed of their gold, was well known to her, but they could not do without his services, and since every mining community suspected its broker of feathering his nest at their expense, there was but little to hope from a change. Chris hated him as much as the men did, for she thought him both vulgar and distasteful, but she was sorry that there should be any likelihood of a disturbance at the present moment when her father was so clearly unfit to cope with it.

He was so absorbed in the letter he was reading that he seemed to have forgotten her presence; but when he had finished his portion of steak and vegetables and she got up and changed the plates and put the cheese in front of him, he glanced at her with a look in his eyes that she did not quite understand.

"Do you like doing that?" he said.

"Like doing what?" she asked in a mystified tone.

"Like waiting on yourself and working hard and living in an out-of-the-way place at the back of beyond?"

She did not answer for a moment, and when she did speak it was only to ask a question.

"Father," she said, "will you let me send for Dr. Weston? I am sure you are not well."

His heavy eyes flashed, and he struck his hand on the table with an angry exclamation.

"Can't you reply to a plain question when it is put to you?" he demanded. "I want to know whether you like living here, or if you would rather go back to civilization again?"

His wrathful tone would have frightened some girls, but Chris had never been frightened in her life, and she felt no fear now—only curiosity.

"Well, if you ask me, I have sometimes thought that I should like to go back to Sydney," she said. "We have been here more than four years now, and I think I am getting a little tired of it. Mind you, I should never have said so if you had not asked me."

"No, I know that you would not," he said in a softened tone. "You are the pluckiest girl a man ever had to stand by him—let who may show the white feather, you never would!"

It was so seldom that his feeling for her found any expression that his words stirred her strangely, and before she had steadied her voice enough to answer, he spoke again.

"I did not know that you cared so much for Sydney," he said.

"Oh, yes, I did," she said quickly. "I loved the great open sea and the beautiful views and the fine broad streets, and the shops and the motor-cars and the big public offices."

"And why did you like them so much?" he asked.

"I liked them because they meant life. I love seeing places where things are being done—the Parliament House and the printing offices and the manufactories and the docks. I don't mean that things are only done in towns—I could be quite happy on a big sheep-run or on a cattle-station, or anywhere that I could have a hand in things myself; but you wouldn't like me to take a turn at washing gold, would you?"

He shook his head with a little shudder and relapsed into a silence so long that she wondered why, if he felt such an interest in the subject, he should have dropped it so suddenly.

But he had not forgotten it. He was only thinking, and picking up the letter that lay beside him, he replaced it in its envelope and put it back into his pocket.

"If anything were to happen to me you would not go to Sydney," he said; "you would go to England."

"To England!" exclaimed Chris in amazement. "I did not know that you had any friends in England."

He smiled rather sadly.

"No, perhaps not," he said. "I have never talked to you about England; but I have friends there, and it is to them that you would go. It is too long a story to tell you now, but my father sent me over to finish my education: he had been

intended for Oxford himself, but he hated books and he made his way out here. I did not care for books much more than he did, but I loved Oxford. I had a happy time there, and I had an even happier time in the Vacations."

He paused a moment, and there was a far-away look in his eyes that roused her wonder.

"How old are you?" he said abruptly.

"Sixteen last July," she answered, more and more bewildered by this strange mood that had taken possession of him at the very moment that he had declared that he must start off directly he had eaten his dinner.

"Then you are old enough to hear the story," he said, "and I can tell you the gist of it in a few sentences. My uncle Reginald was very kind to me, and told me I could look upon the old family house as my home. He had an only child, a daughter named Agatha, a lovely girl with big blue eyes that seemed to me like bits of heaven. Her mother didn't like my coming there—I saw that at once, and from her point of view she was quite right. I was Agatha's first cousin, and I wasn't one of their 'set' as she called it, and when what she dreaded came to pass and we two—mere boy and girl as we were—set to work to break our hearts and say that we couldn't live without each other, she gave Uncle Reginald a terrific dose of 'I told you so,' and packed me off about my business."

Chris's eyes were opened wide with wonder and her breath came quickly between her parted lips. Her father's story had a strange effect upon her, but she was too confused to know exactly what the effect was.

"It was like the end of the world to me," went on Major Strafford, after a pause in which he seemed to be sunk in sad reflections, "and like a silly young ass as I was, I did not foresee that my life would piece itself together again afterwards. So I threw up Oxford and left without taking my degree, and rushed out here again and made my father furious with me. I might have gone to the bad altogether if Heaven had not sent your mother in my way!"

A great wave of relief rushed through Chris's heart, and the unaccustomed tears sprang to her eyes. She knew now what feeling it was that her father's story had raised in her. It was an intense and loyal jealousy for her dead mother; she could not bear to think that the love in which she had so firmly believed had been merely a well-concealed disappointment. Major Strafford saw the tears, and though he made no allusion to them, his next words showed that he understood them.

"I often gave thanks afterwards that my first fancy was knocked on the head," he said. "You know what your mother was, and there's no need for talk between you and me; she knew all about it, and she didn't mind a bit, because she'd got my heart safe in her own. I'm talking to you now as a chum and not as a daughter, for you've been a good chum to me since we came here. No man ever had a better—I know that well enough, though you may think at times that I'm about as agreeable as a bear with a sore head."

"I don't!" cried Chris indignantly, and as she spoke she laid her shapely little brown fingers for a moment on his and then drew them quickly

away as though ashamed of the unwonted demonstration.

"Well, I feel as if I was, anyway; but never mind that now. What I really want to tell you is that I have had a letter from my cousin Agatha after a long silence; she writes very kindly and says that she shares the general admiration of the deeds of the Anzacs, and that has made her think of me away here at Halford's Creek; and as she has not heard for some time, she would like to know how I am getting on."

He spoke as if he was pleased at the mark of friendship, but Chris did not share his feeling.

"I have no patience with all this patronizing praise of Anzacs!" she said. "English people seem to be as much amazed by our powers of fighting as they would be if monkeys suddenly developed powers of speaking."

"No, no, you are too hard on them there," said her father, with a smile of amusement at her vehemence. "But I must tell you about the end of her letter, because there is a message for you in it. Being the only child, she inherited the property and her husband took her name; they have children, and she says that her younger girl is the same age as you are, and that if I have any idea of sending you to England, she would like to have you as a companion for her Stella."

"But you have no idea of sending me to England," said Chris, with a touch of scorn.

"Not of sending you," he answered slowly; "but the time may come when you will have to go."

"I wish that you would tell me exactly what you

mean," said Chris, in a voice that sounded resentful because of the anxiety that lay beneath it.

"Well, I mean this," he said, with a sudden change of manner. "I went to see Dr. Weston yesterday and told him of some symptoms that have been bothering me for a long time, and he says that they may pass off under treatment, but that on the other hand they may be caused by heart trouble that cannot be remedied. There is nothing to worry about—I dare say he is all wrong, and when I can get away we will take a jaunt to Sydney and I will get one of the best physicians in the place to overhaul me; but when I read that letter just now, it seemed to me a strange thing that it should have come just now, and I thought I had better tell you in case of accidents."

He paused, but Chris could not speak. She felt as if wheels were going round and round in her head and a great hammer was banging down blows on her heart—thump, thump, thump! but he sat leaning his head on his hand without so much as glancing at her, and in the silence a heavy step was heard in the passage and the outline of a hat appeared in the doorway.

"If you keep Jonah waiting much longer, he'll kick the palings down," said Mac. "He's got the best part of the paint off 'em already."

"All right, I'm coming," said Major Strafford, and getting up quickly, he made a step towards the door.

"Father! You can't go—you mustn't!" said Chris in a stifled tone.

He turned towards her, and taking her face between his hands, stood looking down upon her with a whimsical look in his eyes.

"Bless you, child, I'm not going to die yet!" he said. "I shall be sorry I told you if you go worrying your little head about it."

He stooped and kissed her, and then at the sound of a mad scuffle of Jonah's heels and an angry shout from Mac, he hurried out of the room.

CHAPTER II

A BLOW OF FATE

"If you want me to clear away the dishes as well as wash 'em, you'll have to dig the potato patch and bed down Jonah when he comes in."

At the sound of the sharp voice, Chris lifted her head from her hands; and as Mac saw the red eyes, a look of consternation overspread her face.

"Sakes alive!" she exclaimed, and sinking into the nearest chair, she sat staring with her hands upon her knees, a veritable picture of astonishment.

"I suppose you two have been having words?" she said at length, seeing that Chris did not speak. "Well, you needn't take it amiss like that even if you have. I had words with my poor husband, plenty of 'em, but he always come round right enough. Men are made like that—they ramp and they tramp, but they always come round again unless they're regular bad lots; and that the Major isn't. His tongue may be a bit rough at times, but his heart's all right—I'll say that for him."

"Ah, but that is just what it isn't!" said Chris, with a tremble in her voice.

"Now don't you go saying what you'll be sorry for by and by," counselled Mac, with a wise shake of the head that sent her hat to a still wilder angle.

"I dare say he's roughed you, but you shut your feelings down and sit on the lid till you feel better; he cares about you all right—I know a man's ways, and you can take my word for it."

"I don't need anybody to tell me that he cares for me," said Chris desperately. "Hold your tongue a minute, Mac, and listen to me. I could see that he wasn't well when he came in, and he's been telling me that Dr. Weston says that there's something bad the matter with his heart, and that very likely he won't get over it."

Mac gave a long whistle of dismay, and then her face cleared again.

"Silly old fool!" she said cheerfully. "It gives me the jim-jams only to look at him. If the Major is fussing about himself, he can't do a worse thing than go asking a back-number like that. I could treat him a sight better myself if he'd only tell me what he feels like; I cured my old man when he got the fever felling trees in Rattlesnake Swamp, and once when my little Bob——"

She broke off suddenly, and Chris, who had never before heard her speak of her dead babies, looked at her in wonder.

"Ah, well, it's no good talking about him," said Mac, with a gulp as she rubbed the sleeve of her old flannel shirt across her eyes. "He was drownded away from me and I can't do nothing for him any more, but sometimes I feel as if I'd give all the world just to see his funny little face again."

"And you have done so much for me," said Chris, with a sudden feeling of shame. She had only been confronted with a possibility of trouble, whereas this poor soul had been borne down with a weight of

sorrow and yet had kept up a brave heart through it all.

"Ah, well, that's the way things work out," returned Mac. "When you've got an ache at your heart like a jabbing tooth, have a go at somebody else's ache, and you'll find it wonderful soothing. I know that, because I've tried it."

"Yes, indeed, you have tried it!" said Chris. "Nobody knows that as well as I do; and you'll help me through this trouble too."

"It'll be time enough to talk about that when the trouble comes," said Mac, who had her own opinion about the Major's fusses and fidgets. "Meantime, let's wash the dishes."

She made a swoop at them as she spoke, and though Chris was only half consoled, she set herself to work that she might have less time to think. One of her father's fidgets was a dislike to seeing Mac at work in his bedroom—"prancing over it like a troop of prairie dogs," as he had once expressed it in a moment of irritation. Knowing this, Chris always took care to sweep it and dust it herself. She never neglected it by any chance, but in her intense desire to do something for him she resolved to devote her afternoon to it, warning Mac meanwhile that supper must be ready at seven so as to give him time to get to the miners' meeting at eight.

"I'll have the supper ready slick enough," said Mac grimly, "but who knows whether he'll eat it if he's got them mad monkeys on his mind! Sweep 'em off the earth—that's what I'd do if I'd got a say in it."

"Why do you hate the miners?" asked Chris,

for she had often been surprised by Mac's vehemence against them.

"Because I owe them something," retorted Mac. "We'd got as smart a store as anybody need want, and then they must go and bust it up by nosing out gold in the creek."

"But why should the gold do it any harm?" persisted Chris. "It ought to have increased your trade."

"Ought!" returned Mac, with a sniff of scorn. "I've never found that ought plays much part in things out here. The gold might have been good for trade if we'd ever seen any of it. But the drink and the dice got hold of it, and we were left with nothing but bad debts."

"But not all the miners are like that," said Chris. "Look at Mr. Derrick—look at Black Barnet!"

"Black Barnet!" said Mac, with a snort that was even more full of scorn than the sniff had been. "What business has he to keep that child of his in a mining camp? 'Can't abear to be parted from him,' that was what he said when I up and told him what I thought about it. Great soft! I've no patience with him! They're all alike, as I've cause to know, and the end of it was that we had to git out of our place and go off where we could. We might have done well if my old man had had a head on his shoulders instead of a turnip, but there was no altering him, and then that flood——"

She stopped short there and swilled the water on to the dishes with a vicious hand, and Chris silently picked up her brush and duster and took herself off to her father's room.

There was plenty to think about as she rubbed

away at the floor and windows and hung up a fresh blind in the place of one that had got torn. For the first time the story of her father's past life had been revealed to her, and it filled her whole mind with an overwhelming interest. She had not liked to ask him any questions, but she wished that she knew what his cousin Agatha was like, and she scanned the photographs that hung on the walls in the vain hope of discovering her likeness. But the photographs were all of herself and her mother. She knew that before she began to look at them, and the only one that struck her afresh was a much faded one that hung in a corner—a photograph not of a person, but of a large house standing in a terraced garden. It hung high upon the wall, and Chris had never taken any heed of it before; but in her new curiosity she tried to get a better view of it now, and standing on a chair, she took it off the nail and turned it over that she might see if there was any name on the back.

"Strafford Royal—for Geoffrey."

That was the house, then, in which he had lived and loved and suffered so many years ago. As she pored over the faint characters she wondered whether Agatha's hand had traced them, and if her heart had ached very badly when Geoffrey was sent away. There was no one to tell her, and she hung the picture up again carefully and looked at the stately proportions of the house with a critical eye. It did not please her nearly so much as their own dear charming house in the outskirts of Sydney. It struck her as too proud and pompous, but still she could not deny that there was something very imposing about it, and she wondered still more how

her father was able to endure the life at Halford's Creek as patiently as he did.

"Especially now that he is ill, poor dear old boy!" she said to herself remorsefully. And getting down from the chair she went back to her work with added zeal.

"I suppose you ain't goin' to git married?" inquired Mac, as she came into the dining-room that evening to find the best china put out, and a vase of flowers in the centre of the table.

"No, but I want things to look more like the things that he used to have," said Chris quietly. "I don't think I've cared enough about that. I've been too busy caring about my own things."

"There's not many girls would have done for him what you have," said Mac fiercely, for Chris had the one soft corner in her tough heart. But Chris only went on with her preparations and made no answer.

"There, now we're all ready," she said at last, "and it's quite time that he came."

It was quite time, for it was already five minutes past seven; but there was no sound of Jonah's returning hoofs nor any call for Mac from the yard, and the vague sense of uneasiness that had been stirring in Chris's heart all day grew stronger and stronger as the minutes went by.

"I can't think where he can be," she said, as she went out on to the verandah to take another look down the long white road. And though Mac merely replied that watched pots never boil, and that if Chris would only sit down and be quiet he would come right enough, it was evident that she shared the girl's anxiety.

But on Chris's third or fourth journey to the verandah a dark object did really appear in the far distance, and as it approached she told herself that Mac had been right to scoff at her, for the object was clearly a horse, and on its back was the figure of a man. She flew in to put the supper on the table, her relief so great that she broke out into a song as glad and fresh as a lark's, only pausing a moment to tell Mac to run out and take Jonah, and let her father have time to wash his hands before supper.

She was singing again for sheer gladness of heart, when she felt a hand grip her arm, and turning quickly, she saw Mac, eyes starting, jaw dropping.

"That dumb beast has brought him home all right," she said, "but it beats me how we're going to get him off its back."

The song died away on Chris's lips, and she stood like a figure of stone.

"I've hitched Jonah up so tight he can't move," went on Mac in a hurried tone; "and now I'm off for the doctor—I'll be back in half a shake."

She was gone even as she spoke, and Chris went out on to the verandah and round to the yard, her knees trembling under her. What she was to see when she got there she did not clearly understand, but what she did see was a hungry and impatient horse, tugging at the rope that held him up to the ring in his stable wall. On his back was a huddled heap, his head sunk so low on his breast that she could not see his face. His hands were a curious grey colour as they lay on the pummel of the saddle. Whether he was alive or not she could not tell, but an emergency always gave her full control of herself, and reaching up she tried to move him. That was

too dangerous—she recognized it at once, for he was far too heavy for her to lift. In an agony of impatience she waited for help to come, patting Jonah meanwhile and beseeching him to be good and not make the danger greater than it was already.

So the minutes passed, and it was not really long—though to her it seemed an eternity—before steps and voices were heard, and Dr. Weston and Mac appeared round the corner of the house.

"Now, then, what's all this about?" said Dr. Weston. Chris gazed at him with her whole soul in her eyes as he took up the nerveless hand and touched the wrist. "He's not dead," he said, and at the words the black pall that had hung over her was lifted away and she drew her breath freely again. "A couple of men will be here directly, and we'll get him into the house; he's had a nasty turn, but by some good luck he has kept his saddle. You go in and get his bed ready—we shall want Mac out here."

"I suppose you mean that he's really dead?" said Mac, as Chris disappeared.

"No, I don't," said the doctor. "I think he's going to die, but he's not dead yet. I sent her in because we may have a troublesome business, and I would rather she didn't see it."

It was a kindly consideration on his part, and though Mac had no opinion of his skill, she was grateful for his thoughtfulness. But the task did not prove to be so difficult as he had feared, and with the help of the two men whom he had asked to follow them it was safely accomplished, and the unconscious patient was carried into the house and laid upon his bed.

Or was he quite unconscious? Chris doubted it from the first, and when Dr. Weston had applied the remedies that he had brought with him, there was no doubt that the eyelids were trying to unclose and the white lips to force themselves into speech.

"Don't let him talk," said the doctor. "Give him a few drops of brandy as often as you can, and keep the hot bottles to his feet. I have to go and see another patient, but I will be back soon to see how he's getting on."

"You'd better go and eat your supper, or you'll be as bad as he is," said Mac, when they were left to their watch.

But Chris only shook her head. She thought of the table that she had laid with such care, and felt as if the sight of it would choke her.

"Well, I'll go and make you some tea," said Mac. "He looks a bit more life-like now, and it's no good your killing yourself. We must have some boiling water anyway, for these bottles will need filling again before long."

Chris made no answer, and she took herself off, but she had no sooner gone than the girl dropped on her knees beside her father and laid her soft cheek against his hand.

"Oh, daddy, don't leave me!" she whispered. "You're just all I've got in the world!"

As if her voice had roused him from his stupor, he opened his eyes suddenly and looked her full in the face.

"I must get up," he said in a feeble voice. "There'll be bad work—I heard it this afternoon—I must go to the meeting——"

He spoke brokenly, with painful pauses for breath

and cold drops starting on his forehead; to tell him to lie still and not worry himself was obviously of no use.

"I will go and tell them that you are ill," said Chris. "They will listen to me."

He did not look satisfied, but on the other hand he did not forbid her to go—he knew that she was right in saying that the miners would listen to her, for whatever they might think of the Warden, they always treated his daughter with the utmost respect. In all probability he was quite well aware that he could not go himself, for the effort of speech had left him utterly exhausted.

He lay still with closed eyes and a look so death-like that Mac gave a perceptible start when she re-entered the room, but a closer scrutiny assured her that he was still alive. She set to work to refill the hot-water bottles, and whispering to her that she had to take a message for him, Chris glided out of the room without his knowing that she was gone.

In the middle of the mining camp stood a rough wooden building in which Solomon Davis, the broker, sold stocks and shares, and in which also the miners held their meetings when any business called them together. Chris had often been into it with her father, and as she hurried along in the darkness she made up her mind as to her plan of action. To march boldly in upon the assembled meeting might be rather an ordeal, for from what had been said it was evident that the miners were in full cry over some grievance; but there was a back entrance to the hall which led to a small room behind the platform, and here she would very likely see some one who would help her.

It was Black Barnet whom she specially hoped to find, for in spite of the swarthy features and lowering appearance that had given him his nickname, he had a heart soft enough to rouse Mac's scorn. The fact that he was secretary to the miners' association made it certain that he would be upon the platform if he was not in the committee-room at the rear, and if she could attract his attention he would escort her into the hall. Even so, it would be a trying task, for she knew only too well what the men could be in times of rage and excitement; but giving herself no time to think, she ran up the wooden steps at the back of the hall and laid her hand upon the door.

CHAPTER III

CHRIS TO THE RESCUE

WHAT spirit it was that possessed the miners, Solomon Davis could not tell; on many a night they had been difficult to deal with, but he had never before experienced this stolid indifference that made them sit like wooden images while he ran through his list of stocks and shares. In vain he pleaded, threatened, cajoled and raged. They would neither buy nor sell, and flinging his papers down on the table at last, he let his anger boil over.

"If you won't do business what do you come here for?" he shouted. "Why don't you stop outside? Another night you shall stop outside, as sure as I've eyes in my head."

"Then there's no fear but we'll come in right enough," cried a big, burly miner, springing to his feet. "If you'd as much as one eye in your head, let alone two, you'd see that we've got something else than buying and selling to worry over to-night. We've got a bone to pick with you, and a big bone too, so you can just go and sit in the committee-room while we get it ready—Black Barnet's there and he'll take care of you."

"And who made you the boss of this show?" demanded Davis, his stout little frame quivering

with mingled rage and fear; but an eager chorus answered him in a moment—

"Samson knows what we want all right. You do as he tells you, or we'll make you, pretty quick!"

The name of Samson had been well bestowed on the man, who stood well over six feet in height and whose muscles swelled out in great knots on his powerful arms. Davis looked at him, and knowing that any attempt at defiance would be worse than useless, he drew up his little figure with all the dignity that he could command and walked majestically through the open door at the back of the platform.

"It's a bit of double dealing we've got to talk about," said Samson, when he had closed the door behind the little broker. "I'll tell you the story first, and you can say what you like about it afterwards. You all know Crazy Mick?"

"Ay, ay," was the universal answer, but the stolid faces did not show any interest—Crazy Mick was not one whose doings had any importance for his neighbours.

"Well, I've often noticed that crazy people have a sight more wits than other people," continued Samson; "perhaps it's having too many wits makes 'em crazy. I don't know about that, I ain't a medical man. But however that may be, Crazy Mick's brought off a little trick that other people might be proud to own. It's a couple of years or more that he pegged out that claim of his on the North Drayton Reef, and he's worked on it year in, year out, without getting anything worth speaking of off it, and he thinks to himself, 'This won't do,' and he comes into town and puts up his claim at Sol Davis's office."

He paused with dramatic effect, and a thrill ran through the audience—this part of the story had the most intense interest for them, for Sol Davis, money-lender and mining auctioneer, had held the fates of only too many of them in the hollow of his hand. Up till now they had believed more or less in his honesty, and there was a breathless hush as they waited for the rest of the story.

"I needn't tell you that Sol had no offers for that claim," went on Samson, "it's a worthless one, and we all know it; but while he was in his office yesterday, Crazy Mick rushed in with his eyes staring and big drops standing on him, and he gasps out, 'Say, Sol, for the love of heaven, have you sold my claim?' Sol never gave a man a straight answer yet, as you all of you know, so he just looks at him and he says, 'What makes you in such a hurry about it all of a sudden?' and Crazy Mick shouts out, 'This! and this!' and holds up a bag of gold dust in one hand and a nugget or two in the other. 'I've struck it rich,' says he, 'and if you've sold my claim I'll go stark, staring mad!' 'Wait a minute and I'll take a look at my books and tell you how it is,' says Sol, and when he comes back he looks at him quite kind-like. 'I'm real sorry for you, my man,' he says, 'but my clerk tells me as 'twas sold yesterday, and here's your money for it, less charges.' He hands him the cheque, and Crazy Mick bursts out in a yell as you might hear from Sydney to Melbourne and rushes out of the office as if a pack of wolves was after him."

Again he paused, and again a breathless silence lay upon the audience: thrilling as the story was, they felt that its point had not yet been reached,

and they did not wish to commit themselves too soon.

" And now we come to the double dealing," said Samson, his voice dropping a little and his eyes travelling along the rows of rugged faces. " That claim hadn't been sold any more than I have, and Sol Davis only wrote out the cheque when he saw the gold."

A storm of hisses rent the air at the words, and a man on the front bench leapt to his feet.

" Fetch him up ! " he shouted. " We'll tear him in bits for this ! "

But Samson shook his head.

" Stop a bit," he said, " you haven't heard me out yet. I told you that claim wasn't sold, and nor 'twas, but I'll tell you what was sold, and that was Sol Davis. Ay, you may stare if you like, but it's true all the same. Crazy Mick hadn't struck it rich a bit; he'd got the dust and the nuggets from a prospector he'd done a good turn for, and the feel of the gold had set his brain all in a flame and he'd made up a trick all by himself and played it off on Sol Davis of all men in the world ! "

" But how do you know all this ? " questioned the man who had spoken before.

" I got it from Mick himself," returned Samson. " I saw him going down to meet the coach, and asked him where he was off to; he's always had a soft spot for me since I nursed him a bit once when he'd got fever, and he let out the tale. He'd no right to cheat, of course; but after all, he's crazy, and I thought he deserved something for getting the better of old Sol, so I let him go and I don't think I was wrong. But our business now is to make up our

minds what we are going to do about it. I asked Sol's clerk in a casual sort of way whether there had been any offers for Mick's claim, and he laughed in my face and said they'd never had a chance of selling it and never would, so we've got him on toast and he deserves no mercy."

"Fetch him up!" was the cry on all sides, and the tone in which it was uttered showed that mercy was the last thing that the unfortunate broker might expect.

"Bring in the prisoner!" shouted Samson, flinging open the door at the back of the platform.

A dead silence followed his words, and he clutched at the doorpost in sudden terror—he had raised blood in the men, he knew that well enough, and if their victim failed them they would turn and rend him without any compunction.

"Bring in the prisoner!" he cried again, and this time a sound of footsteps relieved his fears. He drew back and stood facing the expectant audience with a look of triumph, but as a figure appeared in the doorway a sound of mingled rage and incredulity was heard on every side.

It was indeed impossible to mistake the graceful little form on the platform for that of Sol Davis, the stout and puffy-faced broker. The bright eyes, the head rippling over with curls, the feet as light as a fairy's—they had seen them many a time and had felt a respectful admiration for the Warden's daughter. But what in the name of wonder was she doing here? The bright eyes swept the seething mass of men with a steady glance, and fierce as their mood was, their angry murmurs dropped into silence.

"Will you sit down again?" said Chris in her clear voice. "I have something to say to you."

If each man had been individually asked whether he would listen to the request, he would have replied with a sturdy negative, but the impulse that ran through the crowd moved all to obedience. They sat down, and cast sullen looks at the visitor whom they would have liked to send about her business if some lingering feeling of courtesy had not restrained them.

"I came here to bring you a message from my father," said Chris, in her sweet, girlish voice. "He has been taken suddenly ill, and he has been worrying so much about the meeting to-night that I told him that I would come down to the hall. Dr. Weston thinks that he is very bad indeed."

There was a sound of sympathy as she spoke, for the men liked Major Strafford though they chafed against his rule. There was some impatience mingled with the sympathy, however, for they wanted to get on with their business, and in their secret hearts they were uncommonly glad that the Warden was not there to interfere with them.

Chris was sharp enough to see that, but she was not going without an attempt to hinder the disturbance that her father dreaded.

"I know what you have been talking about," she said; "because I came in by the back way, and Davis told me his story and begged me to let him go and tell it to my father."

"And I'll lay you let Black Barnet take him!" exclaimed Samson, with a dart towards the door.

But Chris stopped him with uplifted hand.

"My father is much too ill to see him," she said.

"He is there, waiting till you send for him, and he was in far too great a fright to deny that he cheated Mick. He made a clean breast of the whole thing; but I want to ask you what you mean to do with him when you have him up?"

The men looked sheepishly from one to another—the proceeding that they had in mind was not such as could be told to this dainty little creature. They wished more than ever that she would remove herself; but since it was clear that she meant to have an answer, they signed to Samson to give her one.

"We mean to punish him," he said, and Chris glanced at him critically.

"I know what you mean by that," she said. "You mean to thrash him, perhaps even to lynch him."

"Well, and if we do, that's no affair of yours," said Samson, in a tone of angry bluster.

But Chris was not to be daunted—the thought of her father's anxiety spurred her on.

"No, it is not my affair," she said, "you are right there; but will you just let me tell you that I can see that you've got a simply splendid chance? If you get rid of Davis, your next broker may be worse; but I can show you how not only to keep him, but to keep him straight. He has cheated you, and he knows that you know it. Beat him or duck him, and you have the law down on you; but forgive him for what he has done on condition that he does not do it again, and he will be bound to you with a chain that he won't dare to break."

The truth of her words was so undeniable that it was difficult to answer them, but the miners were

loath to give up their vengeance, and they shuffled uneasily in their seats. If Black Barnet had been in the chair, Chris felt certain that he would have backed her up; but she did not feel so sure of Samson, and it was an intense relief to her when he began to speak.

"I'll tell you what I think," he remarked; "I think that we were in a bit of a hole, and this little lady has shown us a way out of it. She's quite right when she says that we might have the law down on us if we took to lynching, and I'd like to know how we could punish Davis worse than by making him our slave?"

There were a few malcontents—that was plainly apparent—but the majority were on his side, and without waiting for further discussion Samson once more threw the door open and called to Black Barnet to bring up the prisoner. This time there was no delay; a shuffle of feet on the stairs was heard, and Black Barnet appeared, dragging after him the wretched little broker, who by this time seemed more dead than alive.

Chris would thankfully have escaped, but she dared not leave till she was sure that her work was done, and she slipped into the chair that Samson pushed towards her, and tried to keep as much in the background as possible.

"There's something we want to say to you, Mr. Sol Davis," began Samson in strident tones, as the broker gazed at him with a look of abject terror on his pale face. "There's others in the room better learned than I am, but it's my rightful place to be spokesman, seeing that it's me that Crazy Mick made a friend of."

He paused a moment to enjoy the effect of his words, and Sol's face twitched convulsively, but he gave no other sign of the torture that he was undergoing.

" I'm afraid your education must have been a bit neglected when you was young," pursued Samson, " so I'm going to try and make it up to you a little by telling you a few facts. Them as do wrong is sure to suffer for it—that's the first fact. They may seem to prosper for a time, green bay trees ain't in it with them, and they wax fatter and fatter with their ill-gotten gains; but when they do fall, down they come with a run. That's the second fact that I've got to tell you to-night, and it's one I doubt you won't forget in a hurry."

Again he paused, and again his victim's lip trembled. It was not repentance that shook Sol's soul to its depths, but regret, bitter, stinging, maddening regret, that he had been fool enough to cheat so clumsily as to be found out.

" We all know your little game," went on Samson in an easy and confidential tone. " We don't want to say much about that, for anybody may be led astray; but what we do say is this—robbing a miner of his gold is like robbing another man of his blood, and it's for blood you've got to pay to-night."

He flung himself towards the prisoner with the last words, and as Sol heard them his last lingering remnant of manhood forsook him—his limbs shook and he sank together in his chair, a helpless heap.

" Have you anything to say for yourself? " asked Samson.

Twice the ashen lips opened without uttering a

sound, but at the third attempt a half articulate word came gasping out—" Mercy ! Mercy ! "

" He owns up to it, you see," said Samson grimly. " No need to ask for mercy if he wasn't guilty. Well, gentlemen, it's for you to say if you will show him mercy, but I'll make a suggestion to you—if he signs a paper confessing his guilt and stating that he owes his escape to our kind hearts, shall we witness it and hold it over his head as a weapon in reserve? All those in favour of the resolution hold up their hands."

A forest of brawny fists waved in the air, and the first tears that Sol Davis had shed since he left his mother's knee, gushed from his eyes in sheer relief.

" Here, Derrick, you're the scholar, come and make it out," said Samson.

Coming up to the table, Derrick wrote a few lines on the sheet of paper that Samson held out to him, and passed the pen to the broker.

" Come and sign it," said Samson, and staggering to his feet, Sol came to the table and took the pen in his shaking hand.

" There, that's done," said Samson, folding the paper carefully and putting it away in a capacious pocket-book. " And now I'll only tell you this—if ever you go off the square with us again, there'll be only one thing we shall say to you, and that one thing is: God have mercy on your soul ! Now you can go."

He pointed to the door as he spoke, and without a word the broker stumbled down the steps, hardly daring, even now, to believe in his escape.

" She's a cute one, she is," said Samson, jerking his thumb in Chris's direction.

But Chris was already on her feet, and under cover of the general confusion of tongues was whispering in Derrick's ear.

"Will you come home with me?" she said. "I don't mean that I am afraid, but there might be something you could do to help."

"Of course I will come," said Derrick. "I wish I had known before that the Major was ill—I should have been round directly."

There was little, either in look or manner, to distinguish Derrick from the other miners, but no sooner was he alone with Chris than all the roughness and recklessness seemed to slip away from him and he was once more the courteous gentleman that he had been in the past. Chris was glad of his company, for the effort that she had made was telling on her now, and she started nervously as a heavy step sounded behind them on the road.

"It is only Black Barnet," said Derrick reassuringly. "He said he should come along too in case he could be useful. He told me just now that you are the 'cleverest little monkey alive,' and that he only wished he had half your wits."

He laughed as he spoke, but Chris answered him with a sigh.

"Come, come, you mustn't be downhearted. You were simply grand!" said Derrick. "I wouldn't have believed that any girl could have managed those fellows as you did. How did you get hold of that scheme of yours?"

"I really don't know," said Chris, with another sigh. "As soon as I got into the committee-room, Davis began pouring out the story, and I could see from what Barnet said that the men were dead set

on punishing him. I knew, then, what it was that father had been dreading, and I was determined to stop it somehow. How I could do it, I didn't know, but I told Davis I would gain time anyway by going up myself when he was called for; and the poor little wretch began squirming about and saying that he would promise anything if only I saved his life. So that gave me a hint, and though he looked such a horrid little fat worm, I couldn't help feeling rather sorry for him. And then this plan jumped into my head, and perhaps if he knows that he can't cheat he will end by wanting to be honest."

She had quite forgotten to whom she was speaking, and the sigh that came from Derrick's lips was far heavier than her own had been. She knew what sad thoughts caused it, and reproached herself for her forgetfulness; but when Derrick broke the silence, it was to speak not of himself but of her.

"I don't know what your future will be," he said, "but you will go far and the world will be the better because you have lived in it."

There was something so tender and so sad in his voice, that Chris could hardly keep back her tears. No words would come to her, but reaching out her hand under cover of the darkness, she slipped it into his strong clasp.

CHAPTER IV

PARTING

"WELL, here you are at last!" said Mac in tones of the utmost indignation, as Chris and Derrick came up to the door, Black Barnet slouching a little way in the rear. "I thought you'd made off for good and all, slipping out like that without so much as telling me where you were going."

"Hush, Mac!" said Chris hastily. "I was obliged to go, and I will tell you all about it some other time. How is father now?"

"The doctor's with him now and he don't think nothin' of him," returned Mac. She did not try to soften the statement, for she was still annoyed by Chris's desertion. But Chris did not answer, and only hurried on towards her father's room, signing to Derrick to follow her.

"That's the cleverest little monkey ever hatched," said Black Barnet, finding his tongue as soon as he was left alone with Mac.

"She needn't be so extra clever to get the better of you," said Mac, who never lost a chance of getting her knife into the brawny miner.

"No, I dare say not," assented Barnet with a delighted grin, for he considered Mac as far and away the wittiest and most attractive woman he knew; "but she's done a sight more than that—

she's got the better of the whole lot of us, and dished Sol Davis into the bargain."

"Don't talk rubbish," said Mac unceremoniously, for the statement was so amazing a one that she thought he was romancing.

"All right," said Black Barnet sulkily. "You ask Derrick, that's all. He'll tell you the same tale—so will Samson—so will old Sol himself."

"But do you mean that that child has been gallivanting down to the hall?" exclaimed Mac, tilting her hat further back on her head.

"I don't know what you mean by gallivanting," returned Barnet, "but down to the hall she's been, and no lawyer on earth could have done the trick better than she did. We were all mad to lynch Davis, for we'd caught him on the cheat, and to get him out of our grip was like getting a piece of meat away from a mob of sharp-set tigers. But she done it—cute little beggar—she done it!"

"Sakes alive!" was all Mac said, but the tone in which the words were uttered conveyed volumes. Mac knew the miners through and through, and if she had been asked beforehand whether such a feat was possible, she would have said no a thousand times over.

"And the poor lamb must feel as dead as a doornail," she said. "I made some soup hot for the Major, but he couldn't touch a drop—I'll see she drinks it before she's five minutes older."

But when Mac slipped into the Major's room and whispered to Chris to come and have something, the girl only shook her head. She was kneeling by the bedside, and there was a look in the hollow eyes that searched her face that Mac recognized directly.

"Yes, it is all quite right," said Chris in answer to the look. "There will be no trouble, and you need not worry about it any more. You trust me, don't you?"

A faint smile flitted over his pale face.

"Dear little chum!" he said. "Best little chum a man ever had! Tell Agatha I said so—tell her——" But anything further that he wished to be told remained for ever unspoken, for as Chris bent nearer to catch his feeble tone, there came a sudden gasp and then a stillness.

"Doctor! doctor! come!" she cried. But no doctors could avail now, and as Chris realized that her father was gone from her for ever, something seemed to snap in her overstrained brain and she fell forward on the bed. It was the most merciful thing that could have happened to her, and picking her up in her stalwart arms, Mac carried her away and laid her down in her own room.

"I wonder who there is to take care of her now?" said Dr. Weston, as he stood over her with a very compassionate look on his face.

"Reckon she can look after herself all right," said Mac. "You just ask Barnet what she did to-night."

"I know what she did—Derrick has just told me," returned the doctor. "But she wants taking care of all the same; we can't tell yet what effect all this will have on her—her brain and body are both most sensitive."

"Well, I can take care of her," said Mac. "My body ain't sensitive nor my brain neither."

Dr. Weston could not forbear a smile, sad as he felt, but he did not argue the point any further

That Chris should stay on in that rough mining township without any father to watch over her, was clearly impossible, but he knew of no one to whom he could write, and he was obliged to wait until he could ask Chris herself what was to be done.

When Chris woke up out of the long sleep that followed her swoon, it was not to the dazed bewilderment that he had expected: there was no need to remind her of her father's death. She remembered perfectly what had happened on the previous evening, but though there was an anguish of grief in her heart, she was quite calm and collected, and insisted on writing herself to the lawyer who did her father's business.

"Father told me that I was to write to him if anything happened," she said; "but perhaps I had better telegraph, because I think he ought to come to the funeral."

Mac had certainly been right in saying that Chris was quite capable of taking care of herself, but that did not alter the fact that Halford Creek was a most unsuitable place for her to live under present circumstances. Dr. Weston was relieved to find that she realized this herself, for she told him that Mr. Presley would help her to get rid of the furniture and make all the necessary arrangements for leaving.

"She does not feel it so much as I thought she would," he said confidentially to Mac as he left the house, and Mac received the remark with one of her most contemptuous sniffs.

"She doesn't feel it because her heart's broke so bad that it ain't got no feel left in it," she said.

" It's lucky for her that she's got some one left who understands her."

The lawyer did not fall into the same mistake that the doctor had done. He saw the intense feeling that Chris so sternly repressed, but it made him all the more determined to get her away as quickly as possible. He resolved that he would carry her back with him to Sydney, and leave the Major's affairs to be wound up by some one on the spot.

" It cannot be good for the girl to stay in such an atmosphere as this," he said to himself, as he looked at the group around the grave in the little cemetery. The miners had all come to pay their last token of respect to the Warden, and Sol Davis in a new suit of shiny black broadcloth was well to the front.

But Chris was oblivious. Her heart was in the coffin with her father, and though she shed no tear, her face, white to the lips, revealed the constraint that she was putting on herself.

" And now, my dear child, pack up your things and come away with me to-morrow," said Mr. Presley, when all was over and they were back in the house again. " I am bound to go at once, but I really can't reconcile it to my conscience to leave you here."

But Chris shook her head.

"I will come after you," she said, " but no one but me must see about father's things. I know that I could not go on living here; but Mac will help me clear up the house, and I cannot leave it to any one else."

She was quite determined, and Mr. Presley saw it.

" I don't know whether your father ever told you anything about his affairs," he said, " but I am afraid that there will not be very much for you. I helped him to clear things up when he left Sydney, and he has written to me several times since, so that I know pretty well what the position is. His life insurance will give you £65 a year, and the sale of the furniture will probably be enough to meet any liabilities that there may be here. If you can manage that part of the business with the help of your friends here and then come to me in Sydney, we will see what to do next—it will probably be best for you to go to a boarding school for a year or two."

She looked such a slender slip of a thing that it seemed absolute absurdity to be talking to her about life insurances and the sale of furniture.

" Once get into a nice school with plenty of companions, and you'll be as merry as a cricket," he said as he bade her good-bye.

Mac shook her fist viciously at the departing buggy.

" Don't you have no more to do with him," she said. " Put him in a girls' school! He's a sight more fit for it than you are. We'll stop here—you and me, and I'll make the snuggest little place on earth for you. I can coin money by washing and mending for the miners—they've badgered me to do it times and again, but I've always told them that you and the Major were load enough for one pair of shoulders."

The tears that Mr. Presley had never seen stole into Chris's eyes now.

" Oh, Mac, I wish I could! I wish I could!" she said.

Mac glared at her fiercely.

"You don't mean to tell me that you're going to let that man get the upper hand of you?" she gasped. "I thought you'd a bit more spunk in you than that."

"It's not a question of spunk—it's a question of doing what father told me," said Chris sadly. "But I am not going into a girls' school, so you needn't worry about that."

"Oh, come, that's something, anyway," said Mac in a tone of relief. "I've not much opinion of Sydney myself, but still if the Major told you to live there, I'll come."

"But I am not going to live in Sydney," said Chris. "I am to go to England."

"To England!"

The mingled disgust and consternation in Mac's voice would have lacerated the pride of any English person who had heard it.

"Now what on earth should he tell you to do that for?" she said at last. "Perhaps he wasn't quite in his right mind when he said it?"

There was a gleam of hope in the last words, but Chris shook her head resolutely.

"He was quite in his right mind," she said; "and he told me to do it because he thought it would be the best thing for me. I am to go to his cousin, Lady Strafford, who lives in the big house that was my grandfather's home when he was a boy."

"My!" was all the reply that Mac vouchsafed at first, but presently she murmured softly to herself: "Lyin' on a sofa in a white satin gownd with half a dozen maids combin' out her hair!"

The description was presumably taken from one

of the penny novelettes which she devoured in her few moments of leisure, and knowing nothing of the habits of her father's cousin, Chris felt it better to leave it unchallenged. After a moment of silence, Mac spoke again.

"I'd give the eyes out of my head to come with you, but I can't do it," she said. "I know what England is—a little fussed-up place where you can't so much as turn round without knocking something over with your skirts. I don't think you'll stand it long, but I suppose you'll have to try it if the Major said so."

It was done—the sentence that Chris had so dreaded being obliged to pronounce had been pronounced by Mac herself, but Chris no sooner heard it than she realized how much the parting would mean to her.

"I don't feel as if I can live without you," she said in a voice that quivered strangely in spite of all her efforts to keep it steady.

"That's nonsense," said Mac shortly. "We shan't neither of us like parting, but we're made of better stuff than to die over it. You weren't made to be a fish out of water, and you won't be one over there. As for me, I shall marry Black Barnet."

The last announcement was so abrupt that it fairly took Chris's breath away.

"But I did not know that Black Barnet wanted to marry you," she exclaimed.

"No more he don't," said Mac coolly, "but that's nothing. I've threatened him with it more than once when I've seen how he spoils that little varmint of his. 'If you're not father enough to thrash the sauce out of your Jacky, I'll give him a mother

that'll know how to do it,' I've said to him; and he's just stood there with his jaw dropping and not so much as a word to say for himself."

"Is Jacky anything like your little Bob?" asked Chris.

The hard features worked for a moment, and Mac rubbed her eyes with her rough knuckles.

"What did you ask me that for?" she demanded. "But there—I don't mind telling you—he's the living image of Bob, and sometimes when I look at him I can't believe that he ain't my little chap come back to me out of the sky. I haven't known how to keep my hands off of him sometimes, but I didn't want to be cluttered up with a husband, and as long as I'd got you to see to I was all right. But if I've got to let you go, I must have Jacky, and if Black Barnet's got to be thrown in, it can't be helped."

It did not sound very promising for Barnet's matrimonial happiness, but Chris knew Mac's good qualities so well that she felt that any man whom she took possession of would be blessed indeed. Whether she would be comfortable in the mining camp was a more doubtful matter.

"You won't like to go and live in the huts, will you?" she said.

"Huts! not me, thank you!" returned Mac. "There's a little house near the doctor's been empty this ever so long, and Black Barnet will have to come up there and live with me. I'll get some sticks together and settle in before he's time to wink."

"But could he manage his work from there?" said Chris.

"He won't be a miner when I've got him," was

Mac's calm reply. "I shall sell tea and pies to the men, and he'll wash the dishes and mix the pie crust. I know how to keep my thumb on him."

She did, no doubt, but would Black Barnet ever let himself get under the thumb? That was what Chris wondered, but she was infinitely relieved to find that Mac had a plan of life all ready and waiting. She looked forward with much pleasure to providing the "sticks" for the new home—to offer money would have been an unforgivable insult, she knew, but she could put aside enough things from the sale to make Mac comfortable without any wound to her feelings, and the selection of them brought her the first gleam of light that her dark sky had known.

"I suppose you made it all straight with Barnet?" she said next day as they looked over the carpets together and sorted out sheets and blankets.

"I don't know what you mean by straight," said Mac, as she held a well-worn rug up to the light. "I told him what I mean to do, and he's got to fall in with it so or I'll know the reason why. He's making the ring out of one of his nuggets."

"Oh, then he does care for you after all!" cried Chris with real satisfaction, but Mac soon snuffed that out.

"It comes cheaper that way, so I told him to do it," she remarked drily. "If you must give me anything more, I'll take this rug—it wouldn't fetch nothing if you put it in the sale."

That was Mac's attitude with regard to all the household belongings. Cracked china, broken chairs, bent tea-trays—she was willing to accept, but anything that was likely to bring money for

her cherished nursling, she would have nothing to do with. In vain Chris tried to urge her, she was as unbendable as a flint rock; and seeing that it was a real pain to her, Chris gave up the struggle at last with one secret reservation. That reservation was Jonah, the spirited horse that had been her father's one pleasure in his uncongenial life. It made Chris wretched to part with him, but part with him she must in one way or another, and she knew that Mac would prize every hair of the shining coat that she had been at such pains to groom. It was not until the night before the sale that she broached the subject, and though Mac flatly refused at first, she gave way at the thought of Jonah lonely and perhaps ill-treated by strangers.

"Well, I'll take him," she said. "He'll be like a bit of you to me, and woe betide Jacky and Barnet if they touch so much as one of his hoofs."

Chris felt more at ease when that was settled, for though nothing could repay Mac's devotion, she knew that the possession of a horse would make all the difference to her in her new way of living.

The next day or two were nothing but noise and confusion—the miners showed their feeling for their late Warden's daughter by buying up everything in the most generous fashion. Chris kept as far as possible out of the way of it all, but there were several of them who seized a chance of shaking her by the hand and uttering a word or two of rough sympathy.

"Don't quite forget me," said Derrick sadly, as he held his little pupil's hand in his; "parting with you is like losing the one bit of sunshine from my sky."

"Oh, do come with me!" said Chris impulsively, and then regretted her words as he dropped her hand and turned heavily away.

But even that farewell did not cost her so much as the farewell to Mac—dear, dear Mac, who stood gazing after her as she drove away in Dr. Weston's buggy, with a look of absolute desperation on her face, with one hand holding on to Jonah's mane, and with the other making ineffectual attempts to wipe away her tears with the cuff of her faded red shirt.

CHAPTER V

STRAFFORD ROYAL

On her stay at Mr. Presley's house in Sydney, Chris never cared to look back. It was not that he and his wife were neglectful of her—on the contrary, they did everything in their power to make her happy; but their idea of consolation was to divert her mind with constant entertainment, while, sore in heart and weary in body, she wanted only to be let alone. But stay with them she must until her plans were settled, for there was nowhere else for her to be, and though their well-meant efforts jarred upon her terribly, she could not but be grateful for the kindness that prompted them.

She had written to Lady Strafford from Halford Creek by Mr. Presley's advice, and when the looked-for answer arrived—short, but kind, and expressing willingness to receive her—she was all anxiety to be off: if she had been with congenial friends she might have dreaded the plunge into the unknown, but as it was she was eager to be gone. Mr. Presley took her passage, Mrs. Presley saw to her outfit, and when it was a question of such practical help as this, Chris felt that they were invaluable; yet it was a relief to her to say good-bye to them.

"I can always come back some day if I want to," she said to herself; "and as for father, I'm not

leaving him behind for he is buried in my heart, and wherever I go he goes too."

There were friendly people on board and Chris did not hold aloof from them, but she made confidences to no one, and the lonely little figure that attracted all eyes by its picturesque charm, remained lonely to the end. Her heart failed her a little sometimes as the days went by, but she never allowed herself to wish that she had not come.

" It is what father told me to do," was the assurance with which she put her fears aside.

Lady Strafford had made no suggestions about meeting her, but that did not worry Chris in the least; she was to telegraph the time of her arrival as soon as she reached the London docks. It was too late to reach Strafford Royal that day, and since an Australian lady who had been kind to her on board was going to made a rush round before going to her friends in Scotland, Chris thought she would make a rush round too, for there was much that she was longing to see. That was a breathless day, but both the elderly and the youthful daughter of the Empire enjoyed every moment of it; St. Paul's, the Embankment, the Houses of Parliament, Westminster Abbey, the Parks, the British Museum—they had a look at them all, and the girl's love of seeing places where things were done was gratified to the full.

She felt rather solemn when she woke next morning and realized that before evening came she should have entered upon her new life. The journey was delightful, for the train sped smoothly along, and Chris was able to gaze her fill upon the landscape without any sense of fatigue.

"Isn't it neat!" was her first reflection. "Just as if people had been washing its face and brushing its hair for years."

"And isn't it small!" was her next. "Fancy making such a tiny place as that for sheep to graze in!"

Her thoughts flew back to tangled bush and vast sheep-runs, but she was not at all scornful of the Motherland. "The fields look so little and cosy," she said to herself, "and they are such a pretty colour, just as if some one had been spreading a green velvet shawl on the ground and then a brown velvet shawl, and the hedges are like their fringes sticking up in the air."

She was respectful to the towns they passed, but she had seen big towns in Australia. What pleased her better were the villages: "Such sweet little dolls' places!" she thought. "I should want to pack them up in the box again every night for fear of their getting wet or broken. How pretty those baby houses are, with real thatch on the roof and real palings and real children swinging on the little gates! And just look at those ducks waddling to the village pond—they look as if they were saying, 'We are not a bit afraid of being stolen—there's a real policeman just round the corner!'"

The horses did not meet with so much approbation—they struck her as stout and stiff after the slim, vivid creatures, to which she was accustomed. "I should think they were stuffed ones if they didn't move," was her reflection as she watched a well-fed team tramping slowly along the road as the train stopped at a station. "And the people look rather like the horses; they were quick enough in London,

but down here they look too comfortable to do anything but crawl."

The air of comfort pleased her, nevertheless, and her varied reflections were so interesting that she was quite surprised when the name that she had to look out for appeared.

Rushfield had struck her from the first as a curious and attractive name, for rushes by river banks being unfamiliar to her, she had interpreted it as a field in which people rushed, and she thought that in olden times its inhabitants must have been distinguished for their energy.

But whatever the inhabitants might have done in olden days, they were not rushing when Chris alighted on the platform and looked about her with expectant eyes; it was about half-past five, and the little station seemed to be sleeping in the glow of a golden June, with white fleecy clouds sailing overhead, and the scent of roses thick on the air. She was the only passenger who had got out of the train, and while the station-master conversed with the guard about the non-arrival of a parcel that he had been waiting for according to his own account "for a month of Sundays," a drowsy porter stared at Chris as if her appearance there was a distinct impertinence.

"I suppose they gave up rushing two or three hundred years ago," she thought as she advanced upon the porter. "I wonder if I shall have to shake him before he wakes up enough to understand me."

But no shaking was necessary, for to Chris's surprise, the first sight of the name on the bag she carried woke him into instant animation.

"Strafford!" he exclaimed. "Do you belong at Strafford Royal?"

"Well, I don't quite know about that," said Chris, with a gleam of amusement, "but I am going there now. Is there any one to meet me?"

There was no answer, for the porter had started for the van in search of her box; but at the same moment the hoot of a motor-horn was heard outside, and a car glided into the station yard and drew up at the door.

"I told you we should be late, Benson," said a reproachful voice, and Chris, who was looking and listening with much interest, was rather surprised that Benson's only answer was a grunt and a toss of his chin. She had read so much of the correct behaviour of English servants that it seemed a most unceremonious way of addressing the important looking lady who descended from the car.

"And I don't know a bit what I ought to call her!" she thought, with the conviction that "Cousin Agatha" was a wildly impossible appellation for the stiff and unapproachable personage who "processed"—the word sprang to Chris's brain as she watched her—along the platform.

But the personage took the greeting into her own hands.

"My lady has sent me to meet you, madam," she said in tones of such lofty superiority that Chris felt for a moment of no more account than a dirty feather or a withered leaf.

But then her common sense reasserted itself.

"I dare say they imagine that I'm a kind of wild being of the woods," she thought; "but that makes

no difference to me, myself," and with a strong effort of will she pulled " me, myself " together.

" I am glad to have some one to meet me," she said. " It has been a very long way to come."

There was no reply in words, but she fancied that she saw a softer look on the impassive face, as they entered the car and glided along the sweet-smelling lanes where the wild roses and honeysuckles filled the hedgerows with beauty.

The car turned in at some great iron gates with stone pillars on which stood most formidable looking griffins. The house was in sight now, and she had pored so long and earnestly over the faded photograph that lay at the bottom of her box, that every line seemed familiar to her. It was stately and imposing, that could not be denied, with its grey stone walls and battlements and the long flight of steps that led up to the front door, but there was nothing gloomy about it, for flowers bloomed everywhere and a glory of light rested upon it from the western sky. Chris had expected to feel repelled, but on the contrary she felt strangely attracted towards the splendid old place, and it was with a sense of relief that she alighted from the car and mounted the steps.

But all the same the ordeal was still to come, and as she followed the butler across the hall, she knew that in spite of all her resolutions the colour was ebbing away from her cheek. The room into which she was ushered was a very spacious one, and her first glance gave her a bewildering impression of mirrors, pictures, ornaments, costly rugs and cushioned couches; but as far as she could see there were no human beings in it, and it was not till a

silken *portière* had been held back for her to pass that she heard voices and saw a confusing group before her.

"Miss Strafford!" announced the butler, and instantly every head was turned in her direction, and the glances that were levelled at her seemed to pierce her like swords.

"Ah, here is our little traveller!" said a lady who sat in the armchair near the open window, as she rose and held out a white hand with a gracious gesture. "I hope you are not very tired after your journey? Francis, come and say 'How do you do' to Christina."

It was the first time that Chris had been so called, and the unfamiliar sound added to the strangeness of all about her. She looked at the tall, bearded man who came towards her, without any realization that he was Lady Strafford's husband until he actually spoke to her.

"Welcome to Strafford Royal!" he said, in a tone that Chris liked, and glancing up into his face she saw there a kindly pair of grey eyes that seemed to be searching for something that they could not find.

But that was an absurd fancy, of course—Sir Francis Strafford must have everything that the heart of man could desire.

"And now you must see my young people," said Lady Strafford; "they are all longing to know you."

Chris hoped that that was true, but at any rate they all came forward at their mother's summons—a young man with a lame foot, and a boy and girl so much alike that she guessed at once that they were twins.

"This is Desmond," said Lady Strafford, introducing the first. "He has been wounded at the front, and has come home to get strong. And these are Stephen and Stella; I have two more, but Leila is married and in India, and Lennox, my eldest, is on his ship in the North Sea."

There was something in the tone in which she uttered the last words that would have told an attentive listener that it was in the North Sea that her heart was, but Chris was too busy taking in the three who were present to have any thoughts for the absent. Desmond was like his father, that was her first impression; Stephen and Stella had their mother's regular features and fair colouring, but they had not yet attained to her stately bearing, and looked as if they might have very decided wills of their own.

"I dare say Christina would like to go upstairs and have a cup of tea and a rest after her long journey," said Lady Strafford. "She is to be your friend, Stella, so you can take her up to her room."

"Oh, please, not!" was the instant remark that sprang to Chris's lips, though she managed to keep it back, for the look on Stella's face showed her plainly enough that she disliked the task; but the look was only momentary, for Stella had her mother greatly in awe, and besides, she was too well-brought-up a girl to wish to make a guest feel uncomfortable. That the guest did feel uncomfortable was simply owing to that guest's uncommonly sharp perceptions.

But it was not really Stella who led Chris through the great oak-panelled hall and up the broad staircase. Her thoughts were with her father and he

seemed to move beside her—not wearied and dispirited as she had been used to see him, but bright and gay and full of life and hope. It seemed to her that she could never be lonely in that house with his presence always near her, and that feeling made it a home to her in spite of its size and grandeur and its alarming occupants.

"Mother said that you and I were just the same age," said Stella, breaking in upon her reflections; "but I should have thought that you were older than I am."

"Should you?" said Chris. "I am seventeen this month."

"Oh, well, there is not much difference, then," said Stella. "I shall be seventeen next month."

Her tone implied that there was a good deal of difference nevertheless, and that Chris was quite ready to admit, for she felt that there probably was a very considerable difference between one brought up in these luxurious surroundings and an inhabitant of Halford's Creek.

"Mother said that you had better have Leila's old room," said Stella, changing the subject abruptly. "It is next to mine, and she thought you would feel less lonely."

That was kind of Lady Strafford, and though Chris was not in the least afraid of loneliness, she felt grateful to her for her consideration.

"What a pretty room!" she exclaimed as Stella opened the door; and it was in truth a charming room, with its pale blue walls and hangings, its little white bed and the lovely view over the park away to the distant hills. But what pleased its new owner more than all was the fact that as she

entered, her eyes rested on a counterpart of the very same photograph that lay hidden in her box. It seemed like a welcome to her, even while she wondered how it was that it came to be there among the modern pictures on the walls.

But the explanation came immediately.

"This used to be mother's room when she was a girl," said Stella. "She told me that I could have it if I liked when Leila married, but I would much rather have mine; it is far jollier than this, though it is not so big."

Chris hardly heard the last words, her thoughts were so occupied with the photograph, but Stella's next speech roused her effectually.

"I owe you an awful grudge about one thing," she said.

"I'm very sorry," said Chris. "What have I done?"

"Oh, you haven't done anything; it was mother who did it, but she did it because of you—or rather, she didn't do it."

Chris felt quite bewildered, and she probably looked it as well as felt it, for Stella went on to explain.

"Mother always promised me that I should give up having a governess when I was seventeen and have masters over from Kenchester for music and languages; but when she heard that you were coming she insisted on keeping on Miss Wulstan, because she said you would be so far behind that it would be no good for you to have masters, and I had better go on with her too."

"And don't you like her?" asked Chris, who was quite ready to believe that she was behind other

girls of her age since she had never had any companions by whom to measure herself.

"Oh, I don't mind her, as far as that goes; she is quite the modern sort—London degree and all that kind of thing; but I hate the fact of having a governess. I'm the only daughter at home, and I might just as well come out at once. I suppose girls come out in Australia?"

"I have no doubt they do," said Chris, "but I can't say that I ever saw them doing it."

"Oh, yes, I know that you lived quite in the wilds," said Stella, a little less politely than she might have done if she had not fancied that there was a touch of ridicule in Chris's tone. "But I think I had better ring for your tea and let you have a rest. We have dinner at a quarter to eight—I will tell the maid to come and help you unpack."

"I don't think that we shall ever be friends," said Chris to herself when she was left alone. Then she reproached herself for making hasty judgments, and going across to the window, rested her weary heart and brain with the glory of the sunset sky and the loveliness of the far-stretching landscape.

CHAPTER VI

NEW FRIENDS

HER first evening at Strafford Royal left no very distinct impression on Chris's mind. The dinner was long and tedious, and when it was over she looked and felt so tired that Lady Strafford told her she had better go to bed. A good night's rest made her a different being, and when she woke next morning she was ready to face the situation with courage and hope.

The first thing, evidently, was to know what the situation was, and on this point she had no very clear ideas. In the letter that she had received before she started, Lady Strafford had only said that since her father's death left her alone in the world, she hoped that she would come and stay with them for a time. That sounded very indefinite; and Chris felt that she must know on what terms she was to be. Her father had appointed no guardian for her, and Mr. Presley had told her that he must receive her money from the insurance company until she came of age, and pay it over to her in half-yearly instalments. It was not that that worried her, for she knew that her father had had entire confidence in his lawyer, and therefore she

felt the same; but unlike most girls of her age, she had a great idea of getting things on a clear and business-like footing. She did not know it, but it was an inheritance from her grandfather; it had been the secret of his success in life, and had her father possessed it, his career would have been a very different one. It was just as well, perhaps, that she did not know it, for the memory of her father was so dear, so utterly precious to her, that to act upon principles that were foreign to his nature might have seemed almost a sin to her.

Her father, in her place, would have accepted the situation as it stood and let things drift; but as Chris finished her dressing she made up her mind that she must have what she called a "straight talk" before the day was out either with her host or her hostess.

Lady Strafford, however, did not seem to be in the mood for any talks, "straight" or otherwise; she greeted Chris kindly enough and asked her if she had slept well; then she returned to her letters and only looked up when any one addressed her directly. A good deal of desultory conversation was going on round the table, but there were so many allusions to things that Chris knew nothing about, and as they all seemed to make a bewildering practice of leaving sentences off in the middle, she gave up trying to understand, and amused herself with looking at the portraits that hung on the walls while she ate her breakfast.

And then Desmond's voice broke in on her thoughts with a remark that she could understand.

"No, Stella, I think mother's quite right there—

you're much too young for V.A.D.-ing, and the sooner Miss Wulstan——"

"You need not say 'quite right *there*,' Desmond, as though I were generally wrong," suddenly interposed Lady Strafford, as she glanced up from the letter she was reading; while Stella muttered angrily—

"Do shut up, Desmond! You really haven't a grain."

"Of sense, she means," said Desmond, turning to Chris with a very pleasant smile in his grey eyes. "And I dare say she is right, for it is just what the captain said to me when I left a packet of cigarettes behind one night in the mud."

"Yes, but you ought to tell her why you left them behind," remarked Stella, her face clearing. "They were holding the corner of a wood in France, and he was just giving one of the men a cigarette when some German snipers opened fire on them; and though he was hit in the foot he managed to drag a man who was worse wounded than he was——"

It was Desmond's face that clouded now.

"Oh, do shut up!" he said in his turn, and Chris, who was longing to hear more, was much disappointed that at that moment there was a general rise from the table. She determined, however, that she would get the story out of Stella at some other time. Meanwhile she took Sir Francis's invitation to come into the garden with him as a sign that it was to him that she was to address her "straight talk."

It was a glorious June morning, and in spite of the heat the air was so soft and so sweet with the

scent of flowers, that Chris could not but contrast it with the dry, scorching furnace that she had been accustomed to call summer. They went down the steps of the terrace where the roses lay like a rippling sea over the stone balustrade, and Chris stood still for a moment to gaze about her.

"How lovely it is!" she said half aloud. "How lovely!"

There was a curious twist of the lip under the grey moustache that she learnt to know well enough by and by, but which surprised her then.

"You like it?" he said briefly.

"Why, of course," said Chris emphatically. "Who could help liking it?"

He gave his shoulders a little shrug.

"Oh, well, we hear so much of Colonial coolness," he said, "that I thought you would probably refuse to admire anything."

But that remark touched Chris on a tender spot.

"Do you mind not calling me a Colonial?" she said, looking up into his face.

"Why, you are not ashamed of the Motherland, are you?" he asked, with some curiosity.

"No, no, please don't think that," she cried eagerly. "I love the Motherland—we all love it; love it with our heart's blood. But when you call us Colonials, it seems as if it took away——" She stopped a moment, unable to find the words in which to clothe her thoughts.

Sir Francis looked down at her with much interest. This was evidently an original young person, and he wondered how she was going to fit into her new framework of life.

But Chris was getting at her idea from another side now.

"I suppose you know all Victor Hugo's poetry?" she said, in a tone so simple and direct that it was impossible to suspect her of any want of good faith.

"Well, perhaps not quite all of it," said Sir Francis, stroking his moustache to hide a smile. "Did he write a poem about Colonials?"

"No, not that exactly; but in one of his poems he says that he almost wishes that he were not a Frenchman, so that he might show his love for France by choosing her for his country out of all the nations on the earth. We feel like that. If we are only Colonies we are just cut-off bits of Britain, not really part of her, and yet with no separate life of our own. But if we are Dominions, we have a life of our own, a growth and a power of our own, and we give it to the Motherland of our own free will—

'Ah! je voudrais,
Je voudrais n'être pas Français pour pouvoir dire
Que je te choisis, France!'"

She flung out the lines with a fire that startled him, and he told himself again that this was a most original young person, and that she might have a quite unexpected effect on the family into which she had been pitchforked.

But as he could not very well tell her this, he went back to the starting-point of the discussion.

"Yes, I see what you mean," he said. "But if I mayn't call you a Colonial, am I to call you a member of one of the Dominions beyond the Seas? It sounds a trifle ponderous, doesn't it?"

His smile was so kindly a one that she did not mind it a bit.

"Call me an Anzac," she said. "We love that name, and we don't mean to part with it."

The smile faded from his face as she spoke.

"I don't wonder you love the name," he said. "It means all that glorious courage and devotion which is going to make a new thing of our Empire. But the cost is so terrible that sometimes one wonders whether it can be worth while. Still, I am very glad you have come to us, dear little Miss Anzac," he said, in so charming a way that Chris took him into her heart from that moment.

"There is something that I want to ask you," she said, feeling that her task had been robbed of all its difficulties. "You have been very kind in letting me come here, but I should not like you to feel that you have got to keep me whether you like it or not. You are the only relations I have, because Uncle Edgar was not married, and mother had no brothers or sisters. But I have £65 a year, and I don't like just to come into your house and take everything as if I had a right to it."

She thought he must be offended, for his face changed completely, and he was so long silent that she was able to wish several times over that she had held her tongue.

"It is Lady Strafford that you must talk to about that," he said. "I am only a Stone."

The remark would have been quite unintelligible to her if she had not suddenly remembered that her father had said that his cousin's husband had changed his name when he married her. Could it

be that this dear, delightful man, was made to feel himself of no account at Strafford Royal? But then how was it that he had a title? Surely he must have done something great to earn it. It was all rather mysterious, but she could not very well ask him for any explanations, and he did not seem inclined to vouchsafe any.

"I want to go and look at something across the park," he said. "Will it be too far for you to come with me?"

Too far! Chris could have laughed outright. They struck over the grass and made their way towards a sheet of water that lay shining in the distance.

"I suppose you have plenty of bridges in Australia?" he said, breaking a long silence.

"Why, yes, of course," said Chris, looking rather puzzled. "People must have bridges if they have rivers."

"Ah, but that is just the point," he said, an eager tone creeping into his somewhat languid voice. "People want bridges badly enough sometimes just where they can't get them. Soldiers know all about that when they are campaigning, and I want to build a bridge so light and so easily handled that half a dozen men could set it up."

They had come in sight of the water by this time, and across the narrower end Chris saw a bridge, so fairy-like that she could hardly believe that human hands had built it.

"Oh, how pretty!" she cried, and then added: "But will it bear?"

Sir Francis gave a grunt, but it was a grunt that had no displeasure in it.

"You are a very practical young woman," he said. "I want to make a bridge that is as light as gossamer, but it must also be as strong as steel if it is to be of any real use."

"And isn't this one right?"

"Well, it's not quite up to the standard yet; but it's much better than the last."

"And when it is up to the standard you will let them have it to use in the war?"

But directly Chris had said that, she knew by his face that she had made a mistake.

"*Let* them have it!" he said, as he thrust his hands deep into his pockets and stood gazing at his fairy bridge with a gloomy look in his eyes. "It is not a question of letting—it is a question of begging the authorities on your knees to look at your models, and then getting a letter a couple of months afterwards to say that your communication will receive attention in due course. If one was on the spot and could go at it tooth and nail——" He broke off abruptly. "Ah, well, it's no good talking about it," he said. "We will go back by the farm if you are not tired, I want to speak to the bailiff."

It was not for Chris to go on with the subject, but she longed to know why he could not go at the business tooth and nail if he felt that that was the only way to succeed, and her mind was still busy with the problem when they got back to the house.

"I have letters to write now," said Sir Francis as they mounted the terrace steps; "but Stella is

somewhere about—you must not feel lonely on your first day."

It was so dear of him to think of that, and Chris smiled at him with a very grateful look in her bright eyes as she left him at the door of a room that seemed from her brief glance at it to be much more like a workshop than a study.

"That staircase will take you up to the schoolroom," he said, with a wave of the hand in its direction. But when his door was shut she chose to go on down the passage, for she guessed that it would lead into the central hall of the house, and she wanted to find Lady Strafford before she went in search of Stella.

How she was to find her among all those great rooms, she did not know; but fortune favoured her, for though there was no one to ask, a door stood open through which she saw a vista of book-lined walls, while at the far end of the room sat Lady Strafford herself at a great bureau, with a pen in her hand. To hesitate was not in Chris's nature, and traversing the thick pile carpet with noiseless steps, she came up to her cousin's chair.

"May I speak to you for a minute?" she said.

Lady Strafford raised her head with a start, and the look on her face was chilling in the extreme.

"I thought that you were in the schoolroom with Stella," she said.

"I am just going to the schoolroom, but I wanted to say something to you first," said Chris, holding on to her courage with both hands. "I should have come to you before, but Sir Francis took me out into the garden to look at his bridge."

If Lady Strafford's look had been chilling before; it was freezing now, but she vouchsafed nothing beyond the brief question—

"What do you want to say?"

"I want to say something about my being here," said Chris, plunging into the subject anyhow. "It is very kind of you to have me, but I don't want you to feel that you have got to have me whether you like it or not, because I have £65 a year."

Lady Strafford looked at her reflectively.

"You spoke of the Mr. Presley in whose house you were staying as if he were managing your affairs," she said. "I suppose that your father appointed him as your guardian?"

"No, I have no guardian," said Chris. "Mr. Presley was the lawyer who did father's business for him."

"But this money cannot be paid to you until you come of age," said Lady Strafford. "I suppose it comes to you from your mother? I know that your father lost all his."

Chris winced a little, but she contrived not to show it.

"The money comes from the insurance that father made upon his life," she said, "and Mr. Presley receives it and will send it on to me."

Lady Strafford made a note upon the tablet that lay by her side.

"Very well, I will write to Mr. Presley about it," she said. "He must send it to me for the present, as I am your guardian in fact, if not in law."

But this was not at all what Chris had intended.

"I don't think you will find that Mr. Presley can

do that," she said. "It was all arranged in the will, and he has no power to alter it. I am only telling you about it because I don't want you to feel that you are obliged to have me here—I could pay for myself at a boarding-school until I am old enough to do something."

If Chris had known it, there was nothing that Lady Strafford disliked more than to feel that people were independent of her. She could show great kindness, great generosity, to those who were poorer and weaker than herself, but then they must be willing to acknowledge their weakness and their poverty and behave towards her with becoming humility and gratitude. Though she would not let herself admit it, she took a dislike to the girl from that moment. She had thought to see her father over again in her; but the bright, alert look, the curly brown hair, the dancing hazel eyes, had nothing of Geoffrey Strafford in them, and she had cared for him enough to feel a lingering jealousy of the wife from whom his daughter must have inherited them. She saw that it would be impossible to write to Mr. Presley as she had proposed; but she was not going to acknowledge her defeat, so she veiled it under her most awe-inspiring manner.

"There need be no question of your going to a boarding-school if you determine to make the most of your opportunities here," she said; "it all rests with yourself. I know that your father would rather you were with me than with any one else, and I quite hope that I shall feel very glad that I arranged for you to come. Miss Wulstan has been away for a day or two, but she returns to-

morrow and I trust that she will find you an attentive pupil. You are no doubt a good deal behind Stella; but you must not let that discourage you—patience and perseverance can achieve wonders. You may as well go to the schoolroom now and ask her to show you some of her books. I am busy writing for the post."

She dipped her pen in the ink as she spoke and fixed her eyes upon the half-finished letter before her with a thoughtful frown, and Chris felt that there was nothing for her to do but to beat a retreat.

"I can't think what father meant by saying that her eyes were like bits of heaven," she said to herself as she crossed the hall in a fume. "They must have changed very much since she was young. I should like to tell her what he said about mother that last day—and yet I wouldn't tell her for anything. It would be like casting pearls before swine."

So far the fury of her indignation had carried her; but there her sense of humour came to her aid—the idea of applying such an epithet to the stately and dignified Lady Strafford was so deliciously absurd that she could not help bubbling over with amusement at it. In this happier mood she mounted the stairs, and then stopped short at sight of a framed photograph that hung in a retired corner of the passage at the top.

"Photograph of the Town Hall at Brenton, Yorkshire, built by Francis Stone, Esq.," was printed underneath it, and she stood looking at it with an interest that swept away the thought of her own grievances.

"So he was an architect!" she said to herself. "But if Lady Strafford is ashamed of it, why did she want to marry him? And why didn't he tell her that he was too fond of his work to give it up for her sake?"

Questions easy to ask, and in the opinion of youth—ignorant as yet of the complications of life and love—questions that were as easy to answer as to ask. But Chris had no time to meditate upon them now, for at that moment she heard the tap of a stick behind her, and looking round quickly, saw Desmond limping along, looking so white that, forgetting all else, she sprang forward to his assistance.

CHAPTER VII

A WOUNDED HERO

"Oh, no, it's nothing, thank you. At least, it's only this bothering old foot, and I'm so used to that that it's no good thinking about it."

Desmond spoke cheerfully, but there was a fold in his forehead and a look of pain in his eyes, and Chris felt sure that the bothering old foot which he mentioned so slightingly was causing him severe suffering.

"Can't you rest it a little while?" she said, with such sympathy in look and tone that Desmond could not feel cross as he often did when people "fussed" him, as he ungratefully called it.

"Yes; I'll put it up on the old schoolroom sofa," he said. "I know all the kinks and caves in it, and I used to long for it to sleep on when I was out in the trenches."

He pushed the door open as he spoke and ushered Chris into a sanctum so snug and home-like that she fell in love with it straight away.

"This is our own special 'den,'" he said, as he steered for the sofa. "I am not supposed to have anything to do with it now, but I find myself making for it as if by instinct, and though Miss Wulstan is a dragon, she is not quite hard-hearted enough to turn me out."

It was not exactly what one would imagine a dragon's den to be—that was Chris's first thought as she looked round at the pile of books and papers, the fretwork saws, the paint boxes, the tennis racquets, the Indian clubs, the hockey sticks, and the thousand and one other articles that lay scattered about in every direction. Her thought must have been expressed in her face, for Desmond replied to it.

"You wonder that Miss Wulstan should allow such a mess in her domain?" he said, as he deposited himself on the shabby but comfortable cushions. "But this is not her domain. We have called it the schoolroom from time immemorial, but Miss Wulstan is nothing if not modern, and she prefers to use the term 'study.' Open the door, Stella, and reveal the sacred shrine."

But Stella, who was seated at the table writing a letter, only shook her head.

"You had better wait until you are obliged to see it," she said. "You will have only too much of it when the dragon returns."

"Shall I just go in and have a look?" said Chris.

"Go by all means if you care to," said Stella; and Chris opened the door and saw before her a room that was as rigidly tidy as the so-called schoolroom was bestrewn and distraught. Diagrams hung upon the walls, not a book was out of place on the shelves, an important looking desk with drawers on each side stood with its back to the window, and facing it were two small tables with the neatest of writing appliances placed upon each.

"Miss Wulstan's one joy in life is to imagine that

she is a High School mistress," said Stella as Chris returned to the other room. "She is simply swathed from head to foot in red tape, and as she knows that she is a failure, she vents her disappointment on us. I wouldn't be Mr. Venning for all the gold the world contains."

"Why is she a failure, and who is Mr. Venning?" asked Chris.

"She is a failure because she didn't get the honour degree that she had set her heart on, and when she got a post in a school she lost it again because she fell out with the principal. She's the kind of person who would like to be head mistress of the world, and it's an awful come-down to have to be a private governess; so she takes it out by going in for all the most advanced ideas about women."

"And who is Mr. Venning?" asked Chris again.

"Mr. Venning is a sad-faced individual with a stoop in his shoulders and a deprecating pair of spectacles," put in Desmond with a chuckle. "She went up to London in the same train with me once; and he was on the platform to meet her. He calls himself a journalist, but I should not have thought that he could have got on to the staff of any paper in these hustling days."

"And what has he to do with Miss Wulstan?"

"Only that one day he will become Mr. Wulstan —no, I mean that she will become Mrs. Venning," said Stella. "It seems very odd to me that she should care to encumber herself with a mere man; if she really holds all the opinions she says she does. Stephen loves to get her to talk about the future arrangements of society."

"Where is Stephen, by the way?" asked Desmond.

"He is doing something to his bicycle; we are going into Kenchester, so I must hurry up and finish this letter."

"Are you writing to Lennox?" asked Desmond.

"Yes. I daren't tell mother that I forgot it yesterday, but it will get to him in time for his birthday all the same, I expect; and if it doesn't, it won't make any difference to his high and mightiness, for he certainly has a poor opinion of Stephen and me, whatever he may think of you."

"Lennox is a brother to be proud of," said Desmond, and there was a tone in his voice that made Chris think that he did not like to discuss family matters so freely before a stranger; but Stella only laughed.

"And we are all uncommonly proud of him," she said. "Only unluckily we are never quite proud enough to satisfy mother. She divides mankind into two classes—Lennox in one, and all the rest in the other."

It was perhaps as well that Stephen bounced into the room at that moment, for there was reproof in Desmond's glance, and Stella was not one who could take reproof patiently. But Chris did not notice the glance, for she was busy wondering where, in this division of mankind, Sir Francis came in.

"Now then, Stella, what an age you are!" cried Stephen. "This is my last day, and you might as well make the most of it."

"Stephen is home from Harrow for half-term leave," said Desmond, as they clattered out, cheer-

fully banging the door after them. "He will leave for good at Christmas; he has always been mad about the army, but I don't know that mother would have let him go in for it if it had not been for the war."

Chris felt impelled to turn the conversation to Sir Francis.

"Your father took me to see his bridge after breakfast," she said.

"Ah, did he?" said Desmond, with evident interest. "He does not often talk about it to us, though he knows that I am sympathetic enough."

"Has he given up being an architect?" asked Chris. She did not want to be inquisitive, but she could not help puzzling her brains over the condition of affairs in her new home.

"Yes, he has given it up for a long time, but he still likes to think out inventions, and ever since the war began he has been trying to evolve a bridge that would be of service in the field."

He paused a moment while he debated inwardly whether he should say any more: there were reasons both for and against, but in the end he decided to speak.

"My father was a very clever architect," he said, "and it was after he had built a great hospital that he was knighted; but there is a great deal to do here, and my mother thought that it was better for him to give up his work and help her with the estate."

So that was Lady Strafford's doing! Chris wondered whether the loss of his work was the reason of that unsatisfied look that she had noticed in his eyes; but Desmond felt that he had said quite

as much as ought to be said, and he changed the subject abruptly.

"There are all our family photographs hanging over the mantelpiece," he said. "If you go and look at them you will see us in all stages. Lennox and Leila are the only good-looking members of the party, and I am very glad that Lennox is older than I am, for he graces the position of heir much better than I could ever have done."

It was a handsome face certainly, but though Chris admired it, she liked it much less than Desmond's, for there was a touch of complacency about it that did not appeal to her at all.

"Is he up in the North Sea now?" she asked.

"Yes, I believe so, but they are not allowed to say much. From something that he said in his last letter I fancy that he may be going to the Mediterranean, and if so, he will probably get a few days leave first. It will be just splendid if he does, for I know that mother is eating her heart out for him, though she is too plucky to show it. He is more to her than all the rest of us put together."

He spoke as if it were the most natural thing in the world that it should be so, but Chris took a dislike to the handsome and complacent Lennox on the spot, and was glad to turn her attention to another portrait.

"This Red Cross nurse is very like Stella," she said.

"It is Stella," said Desmond. "We had a cousin staying with us last winter who was nursing, and Stella went mad about it, and raved and stormed because mother wouldn't let her go. She got her-

self up in Hatty's things one day, and made Stephen photograph her. I fancy she thought it would soften mother's heart when she saw it, but of course it didn't, and quite right too. She is much too young, and besides, she is not the sort of girl for it. There are plenty of other things that she can do."

He reached for his stick as he spoke, but Chris could see that the effort to move hurt him.

"Can I get anything for you?" she asked.

"Well, there are some letters that I ought to write," he said; "but to tell you the truth, my foot aches horribly this morning, and I don't know how to let it hang down."

"But you can write without letting it hang down," said Chris, all alert in a moment. "Here is a blotting-pad and some paper, and I dare say I can find you a pen."

"I've got my fountain pen, thank you," said Desmond, holding out his hand for the pad. "It is awfully good of you to wait on me like this."

His tone was grateful but not exactly cordial, and Chris divined his feeling with perfect accuracy.

"How you must hate having to be waited on!" she said.

A great sigh came up from the very depths of his heart, but then he managed to smile.

"Don't think me an utter brute," he said. "Some of the fellows like it all right, I suppose; but there are others to whom it is gall and wormwood, and I just happen to be one of them. I really did not know how to stand it sometimes in the hospital."

"How thankful you will be when you are all right again!" said Chris.

"Ah, but am I going to be all right again?" he said, with a sudden change of tone. "That is just the question, and I can't forget it night or day. The doctors won't say anything at present, and if they can't cure the lameness, it will put an end to my career for good and all."

"But there are plenty of other things besides the Army," said Chris.

"Not for me. My whole heart is in it, and always has been since I was a baby in the nursery. It is not as if I had given up some other kind of work when the call came, and looked forward to going back to it when the need is over. I should hate to be in a Government office, and I have no turn for politics. Now, Lennox is quite different. He seems to make a very good officer, but he often says that he wishes that he had not been mad on going to sea when he was a boy. He would like to be in Parliament, and I shouldn't wonder if he were to retire when the war is over. He loves this place, and he has all sorts of ideas about what he means to do with it when it comes into his hands."

He stopped abruptly, for at that moment the door opened, and on the threshold appeared the stately form of the present owner of Strafford Royal. There was an awkward silence, for though Chris was perfectly unembarrassed, Desmond looked and felt distinctly uncomfortable.

"Where is Stella?" asked Lady Strafford coldly.

"She has gone out with Stephen," said Desmond;

trying to get his feet down to the floor and dropping the writing-pad in the attempt.

"Have you unpacked all your things yet, Christina?" said Lady Strafford, after another moment of silence.

"Not quite all," said Chris cheerfully. "I unpacked one box before breakfast."

"Then you had better go and unpack the other now," said Lady Strafford.

And without a word Chris rose to obey, handing the writing-pad to Desmond as she passed the sofa.

"I am beginning to be sorry that I invited that girl here," said Lady Strafford, as she sat down on the chair that Chris had vacated. "She is so very Colonial."

"What do you mean by Colonial, exactly?" asked Desmond.

There was something in his tone that vexed his mother still further, and she answered sharply—

"I mean pushing and presuming, if you really want to know. She has been wandering all about the place with your father, and then she comes and fastens herself upon you. Of course I don't blame her. She has had no chance of learning good manners, but I don't mean to allow such conduct here."

"I thought that Cousin Geoffrey was such a delightful and exceptional person?" said Desmond.

"So he was," returned Lady Strafford; "but he married no one knows whom, and after he left Sydney he lived in the queerest places. It is no wonder that she is uncivilized."

Desmond could not repress a laugh.

"You remind me of dear old Simpson," he said.

"She actually told Stella that she was thankful to find that the young lady could speak English—she supposed she had picked it up on the voyage."

"That is absurd," said Lady Strafford shortly; "but the fact remains that the poor child has had no advantages. I shall talk to Miss Wulstan as soon as she returns, and tell her that she must do all she can to bring her on—I will not say to Stella's level, for that would be impossible, but as near to that level as she can manage."

"Well, I don't know what her acquirements are," said Desmond, "but she has as good brains in her head as any I ever came across. And I don't see that you can call it presuming of her to go out with father, for I heard him ask her to do so; and as for being here with me, how was she to help herself? The schoolroom is her natural place, and if I choose to come here, that is my fault and not hers."

The last remark was so reasonable that Lady Strafford could not very well take exception to it, so she fell back upon the first.

"You cannot possibly know what her brains are like in this short time," she said, "and I must beg of you not to go putting ideas into her head. She is evidently a girl who ought to be kept in the background, and if you notice her and make much of her it will spoil her completely. I have no doubt that she has all the Colonial inquisitiveness and has been asking any amount of questions."

She had asked very few questions as a matter of fact, for Desmond had volunteered his information. But he thought it better to take refuge in silence, for he knew his mother well, and was quite aware

that she was far more likely to do justice to Chris if he did not champion her cause.

"I can't imagine why your father must needs go and show her his bridge," broke out Lady Strafford after a pause. "It will never come to anything, and he had much better make up his mind to it at once."

But that was an old grievance, and Desmond did not mean to be entrapped into talking about it. So he asked his mother if she had had any further news from Lennox about his leave, and the conversation glided into smoother channels.

CHAPTER VIII

THE HEIR OF THE STRAFFORDS

When Agatha Strafford first met Francis Stone, she was still sore from the hard stroke of fate that had separated her from her cousin Geoffrey : whether she had really loved him might be doubted, but at any rate she had believed that she loved him, and when they were forced to part she told herself that she could never be happy again. She told herself and she told her parents, and though they were convinced that they had done rightly, they made up their minds that they would not oppose any further wishes on her part unless they should fall on some one absolutely unsuitable. The arrival of Francis Stone upon the scene was a great relief, for though he had no money beyond his earnings, he came of a good family; he was attractive looking and highly educated, and he was deeply in love. General Strafford's health was failing rapidly, and since Agatha was his only heir, he was anxious to see her married before he died. So it came about, and the arrangements were hurried on that the wedding might take place before General and Mrs. Strafford went abroad for the winter.

Agatha had no time to ask herself whether she

had done wisely. Nor did she ever ask herself the question in after life, for it was not her way to doubt the wisdom of her own actions. No one could help liking Francis Stone, his nature was so affectionate, his disposition so sweet, his character so honest and upright. The fact that he was obliged to take the name of Strafford, moreover, seemed to make him more entirely her own property, and for her own property she had always the strongest regard. In the first year or two of her married life there had barely been a cloud to mar the sunshine; she enjoyed the adoration that her husband lavished on her, and when her beautiful little Lennox came to her, her whole heart went out to him in a love that no other human being had ever awakened in her.

And then the troubles began. A sudden illness carried off Mrs. Strafford, and the General's grief had such an effect upon him in his weak state that he followed her to the grave before a month was out. Agatha mourned her parents sincerely, but Strafford Royal meant very much to her; and now it was her own, and all her thoughts and hopes and energies were centred upon it, not only because it was hers, but because it would one day belong to her precious baby boy. She had never taken the least interest in her husband's work, and her indifference had been the one drawback to his happiness. He wished that she could understand what it meant to him, but he had soon found that it was best to say little or nothing about it. She had no idea of the way in which it possessed his being. It was not the ideal companionship that he had looked forward

to when he married, and when they settled at Strafford Royal he hoped that things would be more satisfactory now. She would have the estate to occupy her, while he gave himself more entirely to his work. Envy and jealousy were so foreign to him that it never once occurred to him to wish that he had some part in the lands and the money that were settled on his wife and his son. All that he wanted was to be allowed to absorb himself in the tasks that he loved, and to work out the inventions that were always simmering in his brain.

He was engaged on one of these absorbing tasks when General Strafford died, and all through the time of their move into the old house he was obliged to be constantly away. He was building a great hospital, and as he used all his powers to make it the very best and most convenient of its kind, it was a great success. Praise was showered upon him from all quarters, and when the opening day came and he was presented to the royal visitor who came to perform the ceremony, a knighthood was conferred upon him in recognition of his labours "for the cause of suffering humanity." He liked those gracious words better even than the title; but the title pleased him too, for he was glad to feel that he was able to give his wife something in return for all that she was giving him. He had not looked so bright and animated for a long time as he did when he returned home that night with his great piece of news; and he regretted that dinner was already on the table, since he did not like to come out with it before the servants.

"There are several things that I want to talk to

you about," said Agatha, as they sat down to their meal in the spacious dining-room, with portraits of dead and gone Straffords gazing upon them from all sides. "There are many points that must be decided at once, and if you had not been coming home this evening I should have had to send for you."

"I could not possibly have come till after the opening of the hospital," he said, rather rebelliously.

"Then it is a good thing that it is opened and done with," she returned. "There are more important matters to be thought of now. The lease of the home farm is just out, and I think that it would be better for us to keep it in our own hands and work it with a bailiff. I have heard of a very good man, who has been at Luscombe Abbey for some years. Harry Luscombe is going to be at home now, and he wants to work the land himself, so Wilkins is leaving them, and it will be a capital chance for us to secure him."

It would be a capital chance, no doubt, but since his wife seemed to have settled the whole matter already, he did not see that there was much room for consultation, and his mind went back to his own affairs.

"There is a good deal that I want to tell you," he said in his turn. "We had a really splendid time to-day, and I can't tell you what nice things the Prince said."

"Oh, yes, of course nice things are always said on these occasions," she remarked absently; and he felt so discouraged that when the servants had gone

and they were left to their dessert, he brought out his news in a very different way from that which he had intended.

"I had better tell you something that you will see in the paper to-morrow," he said abruptly, breaking in upon her account of the condition of the woods that bordered the park. "I was knighted after the opening ceremony."

But his wife was only listening with half an ear.

"I don't see how you could be benighted at that hour of the afternoon," she said. "But as I was saying, the thinning of the woods has been very much neglected, and we shall have to arrange——"

"Will you attend to me for a moment?" he said, in a more peremptory tone than he had ever yet used to her. "The Prince was pleased to speak very graciously of my work on the hospital, and in recognition of it he gave me a knighthood. You are Lady Strafford now."

There was a smile on his face as he spoke, for he hoped that she would look upon his work with different eyes now that it had found a reward, but it soon faded before the stony astonishment of her gaze.

"That is simply absurd," she said. "You must refuse it at once."

"Why?" he demanded, and his brow grew dark as he uttered the brief question.

She waved her hand towards the portraits that lined the walls.

"There have been Straffords here for hundreds of years," she said. "The Strafford of Henry the Eighth's day might have had a viscounty if he had

chosen, but he said then what I say to-day: 'Our name is more honourable than any dignity that can be bestowed upon it, and I would rather be plain Lennox Strafford than Viscount Rushfield.' Do you think that I could sit here with the eyes of my ancestors upon me and wear a tawdry title because you have built a hospital? I might as well have married a City Alderman!"

An angry flush stole over his face, and his hands clenched fiercely. It was scarcely to be wondered at that at that moment he hated all the ancestral Straffords with a deadly hatred, and felt that the meanest of hovels would be preferable to their family mansion.

"It is too late to refuse it," he said. "A distinction once accepted cannot be thrown back into the Sovereign's face."

That was true—and since no one in the land had a greater regard for her Sovereign than the unwilling Lady Strafford, the direful truth forced itself upon her that she would have to wear the "tawdry title" till she died. Far from giving her a new appreciation of her husband's work, it filled her with an added distaste for it, and she resolved to get him out of it without delay.

"There is nothing that I should have liked less than this infliction," she said. "But since you chose to accept it without reference to me, I suppose I must put up with it. I am glad that you will soon be done with your work; I never liked it, and of course it is utterly unsuitable now."

"What do you mean by 'done' with it?" he asked, in a tone that sounded dangerous.

She looked at him with the same resigned patience that she might have shown to a stupid and refractory child.

"My dear Francis, your own good sense must tell you that it is perfectly impossible for you to keep on your London office and waste your time over plans and specifications," she said. "We have a fine income and a great estate, and it is your duty to help me to manage it. If you persist in your work, you will merely be taking the bread out of the mouths of men who need it more than you do."

Whether he would ever be allowed any share in the management of Strafford Royal, the newly made knight strongly doubted, but his scrupulous nature was not proof against the last argument. To defraud others was an impossibility to him, and when once the matter had been presented to him in that light, he was filled with an uneasiness that took away all his pleasure in his work. Before many months were over, Lady Strafford had her way. The office was given up, the plans and specifications were left to grow dusty on the top shelves of his study, and the only remnant of his former activity was an occasional invention over which he pored and pondered in private.

Many men would have become absolutely soured by such a life as this, but there was a rare quality in his nature that made it possible for him still to love his wife, to find interests and occupations for himself in spite of the fact that she kept the reins strictly in her own hands, and to be an affectionate father to his children though it was their mother who was the arbiter of their lives.

Lady Strafford had too strong a sense of the fitness of things to put Lennox publicly before his father, but the fact that the son had a position in the place that the father could never hold, was bound to make a little friction at times. It was not surprising that Desmond, the plainer, frailer child, who seemed like the shadow of the handsome and imperious Lennox, should creep into the inmost recesses of Sir Francis's heart, while to his mother he was often an annoyance.

Desmond was not particularly clever, nor particularly attractive, he was not, in fact, particularly anything, except sympathetic. He did not seem to resent being outshone by his brilliant elder brother and by the lovely little sister who ruled every one by her fairy-like charm. Another boy had come after Leila, but he had died as a baby, and Lady Strafford had not given the twins much of a welcome, for she was quite satisfied with her existing family. She was far more severe with Stella than she had ever been with Leila; and though Stephen was not treated more rigorously than Desmond had been, he did not possess Desmond's powers of self-control, and he lived in a continual sea of turmoils and commotions.

Nor did Lady Strafford find it so easy to manage any of her young people as she had expected. The eldest son of the house had always gone into the Army, the second into the Navy, while if there were others, they had found posts in the Diplomatic Service or in Government offices. But nothing would satisfy Lennox but to go to sea, and since his mother could refuse him nothing, to sea he had

gone. Desmond, who according to tradition ought to have gone into the Navy, insisted on the Army, and when Stephen was told to prepare himself for Oxford and the Civil Service examination, he had flatly refused, and a series of battles with his mother had ensued. The war had broken out just as he was nearing the end of his school career, and he rejoiced that it had come in time to give him his heart's desire.

They were a determined set, there was no doubt about that, and their mother—who did not see that it was from her that they derived their strong wills, lamented their undutifulness, and wondered how it was that they were ready to please their father while they so often disputed her commands.

Had she been wise to introduce a headstrong young Colonial among them? She asked herself the question as she made her way back from the schoolroom, and was inclined to answer it in the negative, and to wish that she had not let that lingering thought of her Cousin Geoffrey, which she had never been able to cast out of her heart, sway her to the extent of inviting his child to take up her abode at Strafford Royal.

CHAPTER IX

AT LUSCOMBE ABBEY

Miss Wulstan returned on the next morning and Chris's first view of her made her feel that there was some justification for Stella's distaste for schoolroom life. She was trim, tidy and compact—all excellent qualities, of course; but there was a look in her small grey eyes and about her carefully buttoned-up mouth, that showed that she had a firm conviction that the qualities that she did not possess were not worth having. She greeted her new pupil kindly, but quite dispassionately, and checked Stella's attempts at conversation with a ruthless hand.

"It was very good of Lady Strafford to allow me to go to the Bristol meeting," she said, "and I must not waste any more time."

"But there is no need to begin work to-day," persisted Stella; "and you ought to tell us about the Bristol meeting, for you often say that such things are part of a modern girl's education."

"Certainly they are, but they are not the education suitable to lesson hours," said Miss Wulstan in her neat voice. "I shall be glad to tell you about the meeting at another time."

She opened her desk and took out a time-table,

and Stella meanwhile began an explanation to Chris on her own account.

"Miss Wulstan is a member of a Society for the Promotion of Women," she said. "Women are going to be everything in the future—doctors, lawyers, Government officials, merchants and bankers —and the men are not supposed to mind, because all the civilians who have gone to the war say that they will never go into offices again. I don't know exactly what they will do in the new scheme of things, but no doubt Miss Wulstan can tell you."

"Stella, you are talking nonsense," said Miss Wulstan severely; but Stella had achieved her end, for such statements could not be allowed to pass uncontradicted, and she laid down the time-table and stared at the opposite wall through her eye-glasses as though she were gazing into futurity. "I dislike hearing ridicule thrown upon movements that are good and great," she said. "The position of women can never be the same again after the war. They have justified their claims by the magnificent work that they have done, and those who scoffed at their desire for work in former days are hat in hand to them now to come and do it."

She removed her eyes from the wall and turned them on Chris, and what she saw in the girl's face filled her with sudden interest.

"Do you care for these things?" she said.

"I care for everything that helps the world on," said Chris.

"I knew she was a prig," muttered Stella, but

Chris did not hear the remark, and Miss Wulstan took no notice of it.

"Stella has given you an entirely false idea of our aims," she said. "It is not the Promotion of Women for which we work, nor would we call our Society by such a foolish name. It is the Society for the Promotion of Women's Work—a very different thing, as you will see at once. But we mean to make ourselves felt, and the sooner that men realize that the better."

"But don't you think that they do realize it?" ventured Chris.

"Not yet," said Miss Wulstan firmly. "But I was forgetting that you come from Australia. Woman has asserted herself more successfully there than we have been able to do at present. But our day is coming."

"But do you think that it is asserting oneself that brings it?" asked Chris.

"I do," said Miss Wulstan decisively. "We always knew that we were just as well equipped as men for the race of life, but so far we have had no chance of putting our equipment to use. The war has given us that chance, and we are going to show that we know how to use it. I wish you could have heard the magnificent speeches that were made at the meeting yesterday—they were most uplifting—uplifting and inspiring."

"Was one of them made by Mr. Venning?"

The innocence of Stella's voice was rather belied by the look in the corner of her eye, but Miss Wulstan received the question with perfect composure.

"Yes, one of them was made by Mr. Venning,"

she said. "He told us that the woman of the future would be no longer the slave of man, but his guide and counsellor."

"I can well believe it," said Stella, and this time Miss Wulstan was not quite impervious to the underlying mockery of her manner, for a tinge of red came over her cheek, and the thin line of her lips was even closer drawn in.

"We will now go over our plan of studies," she said, and there was a tone in her voice that convinced Chris that it was only by the most determined self-repression that she managed to keep her resentment under control. And there was some ground for resentment. Whatever Stella's private opinion of Mr. Venning might be, it was unpardonable to make fun of him to his betrothed. Chris did not like Miss Wulstan, but she had seen enough to feel sure that she had much to try her in her present position, and she made up her mind that she would do nothing to vex her if she could possibly help it.

The next half-hour put her resolution to the test, for Miss Wulstan started out on the assumption that having been brought up in the "wilds," she must be ignorant of everything but reading and writing. Her elaborate explanations and compassionate questions were very hard to bear. Chris was most anxious to avoid anything that sounded like boasting, but she was obliged to let Miss Wulstan see her mistake, and as the governess discovered where she stood in one subject after another, she was filled with amazement.

"I thought I understood Lady Strafford that you had not been to school?" she said at last.

"No, I never went to school," said Chris.

"Then how have you managed to learn so much? There were no advantages where you lived, were there?"

"I had the advantage of a very good tutor," said Chris. "He gave me lessons two or three times a week, and I prepared for him between whiles."

But Miss Wulstan still looked puzzled.

"I can recognize good teaching when I see it," she said, "but it seems strange that there should be a master of that grade in such a place. Did he get many other pupils?"

"No, I was his only pupil," said Chris. "He was one of the miners."

She was sorry directly she had said it, for she had made up her mind from the moment she saw the stately mansion that was to be her home, that her past ways of life would never be understood and had therefore better be kept to herself. A peculiar expression passed over Miss Wulstan's face, but she said no more, and began to make out a plan of work of a very different kind from that which she had already designed.

"It is a good thing that Stella wants to give extra time to her music and painting," she said; "you are far beyond her in most things, and it would be difficult for you to work together."

Stella did not quite like this; she had a good deal of her mother's nature, and she was prepared to be very kind to the new-comer so long as she could patronize her. To be obliged to look up to her was most unpalatable, and if she had not known by experience that it was absolutely impossible to cheat

Miss Wulstan, she would have comforted herself with believing that Chris was simply making a pretence of knowledge that she did not really possess.

"And what do you think of your new pupil?" asked Lady Strafford, when Miss Wulstan went to speak to her in the library that evening.

"She surprises me," said Miss Wulstan briefly.

"Ah, I can quite imagine that," said Lady Strafford. "She will want a firm hand over her; she has been allowed a great deal too much of her own way, and she strikes me as very presumptuous. It will be a good thing for her to measure herself against Stella and find out how inferior she is."

Miss Wulstan could not repress a little smile.

"I am afraid that if she measures herself against Stella, she will find out her superiority," she said.

"Indeed!" said Lady Strafford, with an incredulous look. "I think that you must be mistaken. I had several letters from her father while he was at Halford's Creek, and she can have had no opportunities there. It was a miserable place—a mere miners' camp."

"So I understand," said Miss Wulstan. "It was one of the miners who was her opportunity. He gave her lessons, and he must have been a first-rate teacher. She has not only been given an excellent education, but it has been acquired by the soundest methods."

It was high praise, but Lady Strafford looked extremely dissatisfied.

"A first-rate teacher would only have become a miner if he had been driven to it by some disgraceful

necessity," she said. "I must have a talk with Christina and see if she is a fit companion for Stella."

But though Lady Strafford did not realize it, Chris was more than a match for her in power of perception and presence of mind, and when she took her out for a drive next day with the express intention of discovering all that she wanted to know, she found that the task was not so easy a one as she had expected. It was, in fact, an impossible one, for Chris was ready for her at every point, and the more she questioned her the less she seemed to elicit.

"I wonder that your father allowed you to remain at Halford's Creek," she said at last. "You seem to have come in contact with very strange people, and it must have been a most unfit place for you to live in."

"My fit place was with father," said Chris, forcing herself to speak quietly "He could not have done without me even if I had been willing to leave him."

A vivid remembrance of his last words rushed over her as she spoke—"Dear little chum—best little chum a man ever had—tell Agatha I said so——" And here she sat in the carriage beside that very Agatha, no one near to overhear them, feeling and knowing that it would be as impossible for her to repeat those last words as if she had been suddenly stricken with dumbness. They were poles asunder, and she was thankful when the carriage turned in at some old stone gates and came to a standstill before the door of a house, not so large and

imposing as Strafford Royal, but with a delightful old-world air about it.

"This is Luscombe Abbey," said Lady Strafford. "I want to see Miss Luscombe about something, and I thought that it would be a good object for a drive."

Miss Luscombe was at home, it seemed, and Chris was glad, for the outside of the house was so attractive that she wanted to see the inside. She had a general impression of tiled floors and wonderful old oak beams, and when the drawing-room door was opened and she saw the casement windows with the roses peeping in at them, she felt as if she had walked straight into the heart of a picture. And then Miss Luscombe came forward to greet them, and Chris forgot the house and all its charms as she looked into the face of its mistress. If beauty is strictly a matter of line and colouring, Miss Luscombe was not beautiful; her hair was grey, her face was pale and her features were irregular, but the soul that looked out through her eyes was so beautiful that it was impossible to see her without loving her.

Chris did not know that she loved her in that first minute, but a strange feeling came over her that Miss Luscombe was in reality what her father had believed his cousin Agatha to be; it was a fantastic idea, of course, but though she told herself so, she could not drive it away, and she sat meditating over it while the two ladies talked.

"I really don't know how we are to manage," were the first words that reached her ear; "more and more men are being taken up, and life is becoming absolutely impossible. If the age is raised again

the chauffeur will have to go, and though I much prefer the carriage, it will be very awkward to be without a car."

"Why not have a lady chauffeur?" said Miss Luscombe, and though the words were commonplace enough, there was something in the voice that seemed to Chris like a loving hand stroking down her nerves. She wished that she would speak again, but Lady Strafford was in full flow.

"I don't at all approve of the way in which women are being taken out of their proper sphere," said Lady Strafford, with a manner that suggested a public platform. "Woman's sphere is the home, and any attempt to remove her from it will only result in the general dislocation of society—the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world, and we may well be content with the part that Nature has assigned to us."

"You have done a good deal more in your time than rock cradles, though," said Miss Luscombe, with a touch of amusement in her tone.

"Certainly I have," said Lady Strafford, drawing herself up. "But that is because it has fallen to my lot to do it. I have never stepped outside the circle of my own duties and responsibilities."

The amusement crept out of Miss Luscombe's look now.

"No, but the circle has been a very wide one, hasn't it?" she said. "Can't you imagine how some women feel who have no husband or children, and no houses and estates to fill up their time?"

"There is always suitable occupation for every woman," returned Lady Strafford. "If she has no

cradle of her own to rock, she can rock the cradle of the desolate orphan, and if she has not an estate to administer, she can administer the affairs of a schoolroom. Miss Wulstan is perfectly content with her opportunities."

Chris was not quite so sure of that after the conversation that she had heard on the previous day, but it was not for her to say so, and she sat glancing from one speaker to the other, her eyes bright with interest.

"But I must not forget what I came to ask you," said Lady Strafford, before Miss Luscombe had time to make any rejoinder to the last speech. "I hear that Hal is coming home on leave, and I want to know whether he has made any mention of Lennox, because I have not heard anything since he wrote a fortnight ago to say that he might be able to pay us a short visit. I thought I should like just to come over and ask you, but of course I am not in the least worried."

She might say so, but all the smooth complacency and superiority had left her tone in a moment. Chris had been conscious of rebellious feelings as she listened, but at this sudden transformation she felt a thrill of sympathy: there was a soft spot in every one—that was the conclusion that she came to; she had often noticed it in the roughest miners, and if it was true at one end of the social scale, why should it not be so at the other?

"I had a letter from Hal only this morning," said Miss Luscombe, "but he did not mention Lennox this time. He said in his last letter that he had seen him and had a chat, but I showed you

that, and their ships may be far enough away from each other now."

"Oh, yes, there is nothing in that to make one anxious," said Lady Strafford, with a cheerfulness that seemed rather forced. "But it is rather—rather strange that Hal should get leave again when he has been home since Lennox."

Chris had a strong suspicion that she had been going to say "unfair" instead of strange, but if Miss Luscombe shared the suspicion she did not let it appear.

"Yes, it is often difficult to make out the reason of things nowadays," she said, "and they are allowed to tell so little that it is no good asking for explanations; but I hope you will soon hear that Lennox is coming. Hal expects to get off next week, and it will be a great comfort to have him; there are so many things that I want to ask him, and though his head is a young head it is a very wise one."

"That is very nice, I am sure," said Lady Strafford in a tone that showed plainly that Hal's head was of no importance to her; great lady as she was, she had not the art of throwing herself into the interests of other people which some great ladies possess in such perfection. But Miss Luscombe was too well used to her ways to be worried by them.

"I have hardly said a word to you yet," she said, turning towards Chris with a grave look that was far sweeter than the smiles of most people. "I was at Strafford Royal when you arrived the other day, but I thought it must be so confusing for you

that I did not come and speak to you then. I am very glad that you have come to see me, and I hope you will soon come again, for I remember your father very well. He was at Oxford with my brother —the father of my nephew Hal of whom we have been talking—and he was often over here when he was staying at General Strafford's."

If Chris had not felt attracted to her for her own sake, she would have been drawn to her by this link with the past, and she was delighted when Miss Luscombe added an invitation to her farewell.

"I wonder whether you could come over to luncheon on Saturday?" she said. "I would bring you back in the afternoon."

"I should love to come," said Chris, and then remembered that she ought to add, "if Lady Strafford will let me."

But Lady Strafford had nothing to say against it, and as they drove home again she told Chris a little more about Miss Luscombe.

"I do not agree with all her views," she said, "but she is very clever and intellectual, and people look up to her greatly. She kept house for her brother after his wife died and she loves her nephew as if he were her own son; the property is his now, but she manages things for him while he is away. He is a great friend of Lennox's, and though he has not Lennox's talents nor his good looks, he is a very nice and estimable young man."

Chris always felt sympathetic towards Lady Strafford when she spoke of Lennox, not because of his talents or his good looks, but because it was pathetic to see one so prosperous and self-satisfied,

yearning after her son as if he were the very heart of her life. She showed her sympathy so plainly that Lady Strafford wondered whether she had not perhaps done her an injustice in her first estimate of her, and as they turned into the avenue she looked down at her kindly.

"I did not say so before Miss Luscombe," she said, "but I think you had better call me Aunt Agatha; it sounds more appropriate than Cousin Agatha, and since there is the relationship, it is rather absurd for you to speak of me as Lady Strafford."

"Thank you," said Chris, "I should like that." And it was no polite fiction on her part, for if she was to say "Aunt Agatha," she could also say "Uncle Francis," and she knew that she should like that very much indeed.

She felt much lighter in heart than she had done since her arrival, and looked so bright when she came down to dinner that both Desmond and Stella noticed the change in her, and wondered secretly how a solitary drive with their formidable mother could have brought it about.

But Lady Strafford's cordiality was not destined to last, and the cloud that overshadowed it arose quite unexpectedly.

"What on earth is this?" exclaimed Stella, as she picked up something from the floor and held it up to the light.

They were all sitting in the small drawing-room; Lady Strafford was knitting, Sir Francis was reading, and Desmond had sought the refuge of a retired sofa that he might put up his foot unnoticed.

"Let me look," he said, and Stella put her find into his hand.

"It looks like the picture of one of Barnum's freaks," she said, "but I can't think how it got here."

"What are you talking about, Stella?" asked Lady Strafford in her repressive tone.

"Well, it really is a freak, mother," said Desmond. "An awfully bony female in a man's hat and coat, big boots, and an axe over her shoulder, and what I should imagine is a pail of pig-wash in her other hand. I suppose some one took her photograph for a wager."

Chris had been sitting at a distant table, finishing a letter to Mrs. Presley, but as he spoke she crossed the room like a flash and stood before him with flaming eyes.

"That is mine," she said; "it must have dropped out of my writing-case. It is a photograph of the best friend I have left in the world. It was not taken for a wager, but because I just loved to have it."

There was dead silence for a moment, and then Lady Strafford spoke.

"Bring it here, Christina," she said.

Chris had taken the photograph and was holding it between her hands as if to guard it from impertinent eyes. She hesitated a moment, but there was a command in the voice that it was not easy to disobey, and going up to Lady Strafford's chair she held it before her without letting go her grasp of it.

"What does 'Mac' mean?" asked Lady Straf-

ford, as she read the word beneath it through her *lorgnette*.

Chris hesitated again, but then she made up her mind to speak.

"I should never have shown any one this photograph," she said, in a voice that was quite clear and steady, "not because I am ashamed of it, but because other people would not understand it. There were no servants to be had at Halford's Creek, and Mrs. Macfarlane lived with us and cooked and washed, and cleaned and groomed father's horse, and took care of us when we were ill. She was always called Mac, and I love the name because it means nurse and comrade and friend to me."

She stood there with the light of the lamp full on her face, her head thrown back, her eyes shining like stars. Sir Francis sat watching her intently, and Desmond said to himself that that was just how Joan of Arc must have looked when she stood before her accusers.

But Lady Strafford had no such romantic notions.

"I am sorry that you should have been brought up in such surroundings," she said; "but still I can understand that you feel grateful to this poor creature."

She waved the photograph away as she spoke, and choking down the words that rushed to her lips, Chris snatched up her writing-case and fled from the room.

CHAPTER X

LENNOX

"I WANT to tell you how awfully sorry I am for being such an utter brute."

It was Desmond who spoke; he had seen Chris go out into the garden before breakfast, and finding her among the roses, with pale cheeks and heavy eyes, had began his apologies without waiting for any ordinary greeting.

She turned with a start as the words fell on her ear, but she said nothing, and he spoke again.

"I had not the least idea that the photograph belonged to you, and I can quite understand how you must have felt when you heard me making fun of it. I asked Stella to tell you how sorry I was when she went up to bed. I hope she gave you my message?"

No, Stella had not given it; she had not even come to Chris's room to see if she could do anything for her, but Chris bore her no grudge for that, and realized that Stella probably felt a certain awkwardness after the scene in the drawing-room. She was not going to give her away, however, and the kindness of Desmond's manner encouraged her to open her heart to him.

"I am quite sure that you would not say anything

to hurt me," she said. "It was very stupid of me to mind, but somehow it all seemed to rush back over me, and the loneliness of being without father——" Her voice faltered, and Desmond hastened to reply.

"I know you must always be thinking about it," he said, "and this life must seem very strange to you. I don't want to bother you, but if ever you like to talk to me about it all—well, here I am, you know."

Chris smiled at him gratefully.

"It is very good of you to trouble about me," she said. "I shall get to understand things better by and by, but it is quite true that everything feels strange to me at present. I think I should have felt more at home if you had all been very poor—I am so accustomed to doing things for myself that I feel as if—as if I was packed all up in cotton-wool."

They had reached a bench in their slow progress round the rose garden, and Desmond sat down with a sigh of relief.

"And it was so good of you to come out to me," she said, seeing how he was trying to get his foot into an easy position.

"I had to come," said Desmond. "I could not sleep last night because I felt so ashamed of myself, and now that I see how pale you look, I feel worse."

"Ah, but I didn't lie awake because of anything that was said to me," replied Chris. "I lay awake because of what I had said myself. It was very wrong of me to be so angry; if I had seen that photograph without knowing anything about it, I might have made just the same remarks. I ought

to have thought of that at the time instead of losing my temper as I did. I must tell Aunt Agatha that I am sorry."

"Oh, I should let it alone now, if I were you," said Desmond. "You were only defending your friend, and it is no good starting the affair all over again."

"Well, if you think that I need not say anything——" began Chris doubtfully. But Desmond knew his mother so well that he felt sure that she was remorseful at the thought of what had happened, and when she was remorseful she was more than ever stern and cold by way of protecting herself against her own feelings. It was to save Chris from that rebuff that he was anxious.

"I am quite certain that you need not speak about it again," he said. "And now I think that we had better be getting back to the house, for it must be breakfast time, and Miss Wulstan's thunders will descend on my head if I make you late. I think you had better run on and leave me to follow at my snail's pace."

She knew that it was his consideration for her that made him suggest that, for she had not forgotten the look on Lady Strafford's face when she found them together in the schoolroom, and she knew that he had not forgotten it either; but it was so difficult for him to get up that she could not resist stopping to help him.

"Do you think that you ought to walk if your foot hurts you so much?" she said, as she saw how he winced as his foot touched the ground.

"No, perhaps not," he said, and there he paused,

but after a minute he began again. "I don't know whether I ought to say it to you, but I'm not going to give in to my foot—my mother thinks that I make a fuss about it, and I can't stand that."

"I dare say Aunt Agatha does not know how bad it feels," said Chris. "But you have your work to think of, and I don't think you ought to risk it because you feel too proud to tell her."

Desmond stopped as she spoke, and stood looking at her as he leaned upon his stick.

"I believe you have hit the nail on the head with that word proud," he remarked; "but how did you know what I was feeling?"

"Because that is how I should feel if any one doubted an ache or pain of mine," said Chris. "But I should be so sorry if you made your foot worse. Can't you get some one else to look at it if it goes on hurting so much?"

"Well, the doctor here reports on it from time to time," said Desmond, "but perhaps I ought to go to town and let one of the big surgeons see it."

"There is no doubt about her sound common sense," he said to himself when Chris had gone on to the house, leaving him to follow. "It is not often you find such a girl as that."

Chris, meanwhile, was thinking gratefully of the good advice that Desmond had given to her, for when Lady Strafford came down she saw at once that there was no ill feeling—there was, indeed, some added kindness in her manner, and even if it was a somewhat pitying kindness, it was better than the cold disapprobation that she had dreaded. And when the letter-bag was brought in, the last traces

of the affair were swept away by the news contained in a communication from Lennox.

"He will be here to-night," exclaimed Lady Strafford, and not one of those at the table needed to be informed who "he" was—there was only one person in the world who could bring that look to her face, and that tone to her voice.

"Hurrah!" cried Desmond as enthusiastically as if no shadow had ever fallen between his mother and himself, for his nature was far too generous to harbour any resentment against the brother who was preferred before him. "What train is he coming by, mother? We shall have to draw lots as to which of us shall go to meet him."

"I shall go and meet him," returned Lady Strafford, "and no drawing of lots will be needed, for I shall not take any of you."

"Not even me?" said Sir Francis good-humouredly.

"Oh, you, of course, if you care to come," she said, but her tone revealed that she would much rather have her son to herself. And probably he so understood it, for after taking out his pocket-book and turning its pages for a moment or two, he announced that he had forgotten an engagement at Kenchester, and that he should not be back in time to meet the train at Rushfield.

"I suppose you are sure that he will come to Rushfield and not by the express to Kenchester?" he said, as he put the book back in his pocket.

"Of course I am sure," returned Lady Strafford. "He says distinctly, 'I shall arrive by the 5.39 at Rushfield.' Lennox always knows his own mind,

and never alters arrangements when he has once made them."

Her tone implied that other people frequently committed this unpardonable sin, and Sir Francis said no more.

There were to be no lessons after midday in honour of Lennox's arrival, and Chris was glad that she should not be shut away in the schoolroom when the redoubtable hero appeared; she did not think that she was going to like him, but she wanted to see him. It was the train by which she had herself arrived, and if it was punctual they ought to be at the house soon after six. The pair of greys were fast goers, and as Chris sat at her bedroom window with a book in her hand, she listened for the sound of their hoofs coming up the avenue.

She had purposely stolen away from the rest of the party, for she thought that they ought to have the first meeting without the presence of a stranger, and when the sound of the returning carriage was heard at last, she peeped out from behind her curtain with a feeling of intense interest.

But the interest was wasted, no manly figure in blue and gold uniform sat beside Lady Strafford; and since there was no reason now for remaining upstairs, Chris ran down, all eagerness to know what had happened.

Lady Strafford was in the small drawing-room, where she had ordered tea to be ready on her return, and though she was replying to questions and comments with her usual composure, Chris could see that the hand that took up the tea-pot was not quite steady.

"I am not in the least surprised that he has missed his train," she was saying as Chris came up to the window near which the tea-table stood. "He would have to go to the Admiralty when he arrived in London, and once there, no one can say how long he might be detained."

"Well, anyway he might have sent you a telegram," said Stella, "and not kept you——"

Lady Strafford stopped her with an angry look, and Desmond saw it and hurled himself into the breach.

"No doubt he will come by the next train," he said.

The look was contemptuous now.

"Of course he will come by the next train. What a talent you have for making perfectly obvious remarks, Desmond! But since the next train does not get in until half-past eight, I must send an order to the kitchen about dinner; we will all have it at nine, for I should not like him to sit down to a meal by himself on his first evening at home. The car can go to the station for him when it returns from Kenchester."

"And if you do not care to go, I can meet him," said Desmond.

But to this his mother made no reply. She did not intend to go herself, for if she did she would not have time to change for dinner, and she had never sat down to dinner in her life without having first put on an evening dress; but she could not bear any one else to go, and Desmond understood her feeling well enough not to press for an answer.

"I am going to give my orders now, and then I

shall have some letters to get ready for the post," she said, as she rose from the tea-table. "I want to take another look at Lennox's room to make sure that everything is ready, so I shall write upstairs in my dressing-room."

She disappeared, and before she had been gone a quarter of an hour a most untoward event happened. Her rooms were on the garden side of the house, so that she saw and heard nothing of what went on in the front, and as she sat absorbed in her writing, trying to finish quickly that she might be dressed and ready to welcome her son, the car drove up to the door and from it descended not only Sir Francis, but a tall young man in a naval uniform. Stella was passing through the hall at the moment, and rushing forward, she threw her arms round her brother and hurled a volume of questions at his head.

"We will explain it all by and by," said her father. "What we want now is some tea—we are both dying of thirst."

"Come along—it's all there still," said Stella; "at least, the bread and butter and cakes are—we'll have some fresh tea made in a minute."

She flew on ahead to ring the bell and give the order, and before Chris had time to make her escape, or indeed to understand what was happening, Sir Francis and his son were on the threshold, and she was being introduced to the hero of whom she had heard so much.

"But does Aunt Agatha know?" was the thought that darted immediately into her mind, and as soon as she could she turned to ask Stella.

But Stella was far too excited to pay any attention, and it was Sir Francis who answered.

"Ah, to be sure, I must go and tell her," he said. "Do you know where she is?"

"She is in her dressing-room, writing letters," said Chris. "Shall I go and tell her?"

"No, no, I will go," he said, and Chris looked after him wistfully as he turned to leave the room. She did not wonder at the worried lines in his forehead, but she did not like to see them, all the same.

But as it happened, Sir Francis got no further than the door, for just as he reached it, it opened from the outside, and there before him stood his wife, stern and majestic as ever.

"Oh, you are back?" she said. "I thought that after all I would finish my letters down here."

He opened his mouth to speak, but she swept past him into the room, and then her eyes fell upon Lennox, and she stopped short and went as white as a sheet.

"Hallo, mother!" said Lennox. "I was wondering where you were."

He pulled his long length up out of his chair, put down his cup of tea and crossed the room to meet her, and all the while she stood as if turned to stone. Sir Francis, Desmond, Stella and Chris gazed at her with fascinated eyes.

"When did you arrive?" she said at last, and her manner was so icy that Chris gave an involuntary shiver.

"How that will hurt him!" she said to herself. But she need not have worried, for Lennox was not one who noticed shades of manner.

"I came over from Kenchester with father," he said, kissing her cheek and then turning back to the tea-table. "I don't know when I have been so thirsty. Give me another cup, Stella."

A shudder ran through Lady Strafford's frame, and she sank into the nearest chair, incapable of speech.

Stella was giving him his tea! An irresponsible schoolgirl who was never allowed to touch the tea-pot was splashing milk and hurling lumps of sugar into the cup of her best-beloved, her idol, her own sacred possession, of whose every look and gesture she was tenacious with a jealousy the depths of which had never yet been fathomed. Sir Francis understood perfectly what she was feeling, and since, like Desmond, he had a turn for flinging himself into breaches and espousing desperate causes, he made a gallant attempt now.

"Yes, we came back together," he said. "The car was put up as usual at the garage close to the station. I was not sure what time the meeting would be over, and told Benson that I would come there for him; to my utter surprise as I went in I saw Lennox and Hal Luscombe standing in the station yard. Hal saw Lennox at the Admiralty, and persuaded Lennox to come back with him. Miss Luscombe was there to meet Hal, and they would have brought Lennox on here if I had not happened to be in Kenchester. I am so glad that you have him now instead of waiting till nine."

"It is dear of him," said Chris to herself, "but it won't do a bit of good."

And she was right, it did no good at all, it rather

did harm, for not only had Sir Francis had the first sight, the first touch, of the son who was her darling and not his, but his revelations, well-meant as they were, planted fresh stabs in her already sore heart. Lennox had known perfectly well that she would be at the station to meet him, and yet he had changed his plan without a word to her—that was the first stab; and the second stab was the fact that Miss Luscombe, who was only Hal's aunt and not his mother, however devoted she might have been to him since the days of his babyhood, had met him without any hitch and had carried him with her triumphantly to his home.

Hal was always something of a grievance to her, for though she invariably spoke of him as if he were so immeasurably below Lennox that there could be no rivalry between them, she resented any success on his part as if it were an impertinence. Entering Osborne together, the two boys had gone through their career neck and neck, and she could only attribute it to favouritism that when war broke out Hal should be appointed to an Admiral's flagship, while Lennox was relegated to an unimportant cruiser.

"Oh, yes, I know how such things are done," she had remarked with great scorn when the news first reached them. "Admiral Dunbar is the cousin of Hal's mother's brother-in-law." And from that position nothing would afterwards move her.

But sharp though these stabs were, they did not wound her so sorely as the visible fact that the officious Stella was pouring Lennox out a third cup of tea before her very eyes, and the wrath that she

felt broke up the stony stupor that had held her in its grip.

"You seem to have managed everything very cleverly without my assistance," she said, "so I may as well go back to my letters." And rising from her chair, she walked out of the room with a stately step, while its occupants stared at her departing form with speechless dismay.

CHAPTER XI

A GLIMPSE OF THE PAST

"I THINK that what is the matter with English people is that they have too many little things in their lives and too much time to spend on the little things," said Chris to herself.

She was standing at her bedroom, gazing out on her favourite view of the tree-shaded slopes of the park with the hills beyond. The scene that she had just witnessed had amazed her, had even a little awed her, and with her usual clear-sighted habits of thought she wanted to sort it out—to see where it had begun and where it was likely to lead.

"I like lots of things in England," was her summing-up, "like them much better than I thought I possibly could; but Mac was quite right when she said it was a country where you couldn't turn round without knocking something over with your skirts. I am so afraid of knocking something over that I shall soon be afraid to turn round."

There had certainly been no time for brooding over little things in Chris's life at Halford's Creek; she had been up against big things all the time, and she could look back on occasions when she had dealt with a flood or a fire or a badly injured man deposited at their door, with far less perturbation than the Strafford family had shown over Lennox's

appearance by one train when he had been expected by another.

"I should have thought that the war would have shaken people up more," she thought. "I fancy it comes from too much padding. If Aunt Agatha had to turn to and do things herself instead of always having buffers between her and them, it would do her all the good in the world. Simpson must be like a mass of cotton-wool keeping off the jolts and shocks of life. I wish she could have Mac for her maid—she would rouse her!"

She smiled as a vision rose up before her of Mac installed at Strafford Royal as personal attendant to its majestic owner, but the smile had a good deal of sadness in it, for she felt at times as if she were shut up in a scented and airless room, and she longed for Mac's unconventional ways as she might have longed for a fresh mountain breeze. But such longings were too unnerving to be safe indulgences, and turning away from the window, she set to work to prepare for dinner.

"Mac and Simpson would get on about as well together as a mad kangaroo and a respectable Alderney cow," she said to herself as she went out into the corridor, and even as the thought passed through her mind she saw Simpson advancing towards her with a uniform coat over her arm.

Simpson had never addressed Chris except in terms of the most distant superiority, but this evening there was a different look about her somehow, and instead of passing her with what Chris mentally termed a "whalebone bend," she actually stopped and spoke to her of her own accord.

"Now that the men-servants have gone to the war, I like to look after the young gentlemen myself," she said; "but even if they had been here, I don't think I could have let any one else but myself wait upon Mr. Lennox to-night. I can't help calling him Mr. Lennox, though he ought to be called Mr. Strafford by rights; but there was a time when he was 'Lenny' to me and I was 'Simmey' to him. And will you believe it, miss, when I went to his room just now to see that his evening things were properly put out, he said to me, 'Simmey, there's a button loose on my coat, will you get out your thimble and sew it on for me?' Bless his heart, I'd do a deal more than that for him, and well he knows it."

Could this be Simpson—the mass of cotton-wool, the respectable Alderney cow? Chris felt ashamed of her harsh judgments, and more than that, she felt a touch of doubt as to the soundness of her strictures on English ways. Perhaps there was more for her to learn before she could sum them up, perhaps her view of Lennox and of Lady Strafford herself might be modified when she had found out more about them.

This idea seemed to be justified when she reached the drawing-room and found the family assembled in what appeared to be perfect peace and concord. After that terrible exit she had fully expected that Lady Strafford would remain in her own room, and that Lennox would be wrapped in a pall of remorseful gloom; but to her surprise, mother and son were seated side by side on the sofa as happily as if no cloud had darkened their sky. Desmond saw her

surprise so plainly marked upon her face that he managed to draw her away into a corner with a whispered word in her ear.

"It is all right," he said. "Lennox did send a telegram, but it was delayed and only came after mother had started for the station; one of the new housemaids took it in, and instead of giving it to the butler, she took upon herself to decide that it was for my father, and put it on his study table, and it was only discovered when he went into the room after tea. It was unfortunate, but it has blown over now; Ellen was to blame and not Lennox, so my mother is perfectly happy."

He looked so relieved that Chris felt that she must have been wrong, after all, in calling the affair "little." An encounter with Lady Strafford in their sight was nothing short of a catastrophe, and since this was so, she could not but share Desmond's relief and feel thankful that the storm had passed over.

She had, however, a little worry on her own account, and she did not quite know what to do about it. The next day was Saturday, and according to Miss Luscombe's arrangement, she was to spend the day with her. But surely she would not be wanted when her nephew had just returned, and it would be dreadful to go and find herself in the way. She made up her mind to ask Lady Strafford, during the evening, if she should write a note; and having come to that decision, she put the matter out of her thoughts, and gave herself up to listening for all the interesting and exciting stories that Lennox surely had to tell. But in spite of the

questions with which his expectant family plied him, there was very little to be got out of him.

Was it not a terrible strain to be always on the watch for the enemy, night and day? Well, nobody got it night and day; if they had night watch they turned in and slept in the daytime. Was it not fearfully monotonous to be stationed on those grim, grey waves, month after month? The waves were not always grey by any means, sometimes they were delightfully blue and sunny; and as to being monotonous, it would no doubt be quite as monotonous in the Mediterranean.

It reminded Chris of a game of battledore and shuttlecock—the shuttlecock was launched, but it was always neatly caught and sent back again; and though Lennox did not refuse to answer their questions, his replies left them no wiser than they were before. She studied him attentively from the opposite side of the table, and wondered if the handsome face, so like his mother's, was only a mask for feelings and opinions that he did not show. She disliked him because he behaved with as cool an assurance as though he were the actual and not the future master of the house; she liked him because there was something in his look and manner that showed he was accustomed to do things and to make other people do them—a type of man that she had always admired.

But Lennox had had enough of being questioned by the time that dinner was over, and they were no sooner back in the drawing-room than he turned a glance of calm scrutiny upon the new-comer.

"So this is my cousin from Australia!" he said.

"I am afraid you will find us very dull over here—in war-time, anyway. We put in at Sydney on one of my voyages, and it was one round of gaiety the whole time we were there—dinners and dances and receptions. The people seemed as if they couldn't be glad enough to see us."

There was something in his manner that Chris took to mean that the sight of a British man-of-war was a wonderful event in their uncivilized existence. She wronged him very likely, but the mere suspicion of patronage always roused her fighting spirit, and the gleam in her eye was like a sword-flash.

"The inhabitants of Sydney are some of the most hospitable people in the world," she said. "They never lose a chance of doing a kindness."

"Scored one there!" said Desmond to himself, with an inward chuckle.

But though Lennox was considerably surprised, he did not seem offended.

"If you were so fond of Sydney you must have found it hard to leave it," he said in quite a different tone.

"Lennox, I want to show you this new photograph of Leila's baby," said Lady Strafford, looking up over her knitting with an expression that Desmond and Stella well understood.

But Lennox did not move.

"All babies are exactly alike as far as I have ever been able to see," he said. "In what part of Sydney did you live?"

Chris felt extremely uncomfortable, but she could not make him get up and go and sit beside his mother, and she was obliged to answer.

"Our house was on South Point, looking over Jackson Harbour," she said. "But I have not been there for a long while—we were down at the Back of Beyond."

"And where may that be?" asked Lennox.

"Well, the place was called Halford's Creek, but I don't suppose that that would convey anything to you, because it is not one of the well-known mining districts."

"Mining!" said Lennox, with a lift of his eyebrows. "All I know of mining is the *Luck of Roaring Camp*. Was that the kind of place that you were in?"

"America and Australia are very different," said Chris guardedly.

But Lennox was rather taken by the idea of this pretty little May-blossom bit of humanity having come out of a mining camp, and he insisted on pursuing the subject, much to his mother's annoyance.

"But mining camps are the same all the world over," he said; "and miners are lawless, God-forsaken creatures, hardly fit to be called human beings."

Whether he was in earnest or not, Chris did not know, but the thought of her beloved tutor, of Black Barnet with his tender heart hidden under his surly demeanour, and of many another who had shown her kindness and consideration, sent her caution to the winds.

"I don't know what you mean by God-forsaken," she said; "they are often rough and uncouth, but they can be gentle enough when people are in trouble.

Would you say that a man was God-forsaken who rushed into a burning hut to save another, and that other a man who had been one of his worst enemies?"

"Do you mean that one of your miners did that?"

"Yes," said Chris, her eyes alight and the colour coming and going in her cheek; "and I could tell you lots of other things like that. I could tell you how generous they are, turning out their pockets for any one who is down on his luck, and giving up their last crust to a hungry child. I know they do lots of things they shouldn't do, but they are not God-forsaken."

She was certainly a most interesting addition to the family party—Sir Francis and Desmond had found that out already, though they were too politic to let their discovery appear; but Lennox had always gone his own way, and he did not scruple to go on drawing her out.

"You can't have known much about the things that they shouldn't have done," he said drily. "I don't suppose you ever went into the camp, and if you did they would have turned a deaf ear if you had tried to reason with them."

"They did not always turn a deaf ear," said Chris. "I know it is said that when their blood is up they can no more be held in check than if they were tigers; but once when I had to face them——"

She stopped short; this was the kind of thing that she had made up her mind that she would never tell. But Lennox was really interested, and had no idea of letting her off.

" I don't know that I should care to face the men of a mining camp when their blood was up," he said. " Tell me how you did it."

Chris did not mean to tell him, but at this moment Lady Strafford made another attempt.

" Suppose you come and talk to me a little while now, Lennox," she said. " I want to show you the reports that the forester has sent in about the woods that must be thinned this autumn."

Possessions ! that was all she thought of—flocks and herds, forests and farms—so Chris said to herself as she waited for Lennox to get up out of the comfortable chair in which he was lounging.

But Lennox made no effort to move.

" The morning is the time for business, mother," he said. " I will give you as long as you like to-morrow, though you are much more capable of deciding such points than I am. I feel thoroughly lazy to-night, and I want to hear how these same bloodthirsty miners were brought to book."

Lady Strafford said no more : if it had been any one except Lennox who spoke, she would instantly have ordered Chris off to bed as a sign that her authority was supreme; but since it was her idol who defied her, she relapsed into silence, and only the clashing of her knitting-pins betrayed her wounded feeling.

It all seemed so trivial to Chris—so paltry and so trivial, and yielding to a sudden impulse, she launched out into the tale of Sol Davis and Crazy Mick. She had a gift for narration, as her father had often realized, a gift that made her hearers see the scenes she described, and those who heard her

now saw the scene in the miners' hall as though it was being enacted before their eyes. Sol Davis, the stout little broker, his hands covered with rings and his face chalk-white with fear; Samson, towering above him on the platform, his brawny fingers itching to clutch the fat neck of the despicable cheat and bully; the lines of angry faces, the eyes that glowed like hot coals, the parted lips that panted for their prey, and the slim little figure that fronted them with dauntless courage—they saw it all; and though Chris did not make much of her own part in it, they had only to look at her to feel of what finely tempered steel her nature must be made if it could win against such odds as these.

Even Lady Strafford felt it, reluctant though she was to own it; her own comfortable and easy way of life was to her the only proper form of existence. But as she listened to the story that seemed to her so extraordinary, she felt a sudden suspicion that this softly padded world in which she lived was not the real world at all, and that it might one day fall away from her and leave her cold and defenceless. And then the suspicion melted away, and she told herself that she had never before been a witness of anything so presumptuous and unbecoming.

"I think that you are talking rather too much, Christina," she said coldly. "It is quite time that you went to bed."

It was not quite time, as a matter of fact, for the girls were not expected to disappear before a quarter to ten, and it was still only half-past nine; but Chris rose at once. She could not go, however, until she had asked a question, and with the tide of her strong

feeling still unspent, she was not afraid to address the stony figure in the arm-chair.

"Do you think that Miss Luscombe will want me to go to her to-morrow if her nephew has only just come home?" she said. "Had I not better send to see if she would really like to have me?"

But Lady Strafford thought only of the relief of being rid for a while of this most objectionable young person, and she answered with swift decision—

"Certainly you must go. An engagement cannot be thrown over in that irresponsible kind of way. I shall make arrangements for you to go to the Abbey in the morning."

And in her heart she added, "And I should like to make arrangements for you not to come back again."

CHAPTER XII

A DARING LEAP

"GOING to see Miss Luscombe, Chris? I'll take you over; I want to have a chat with Hal."

Lady Strafford shrugged her shoulders impatiently: these men of hers were too wearing for words. She had told her family from the first that Christina was the proper way of addressing the new-comer and that she did not wish the informal Chris to be used. It must have the effect of putting the girl still more at her ease when she was only too much at her ease already.

But that was not Sir Francis's only offence—why should he offer to take her to Miss Luscombe's as if he wished her to consider him at her beck and call? And why—worst delinquency of all—should he want to go off and see Hal when his own boy was just come home? She did not stay to reflect that she had never allowed him to look on Lennox as his own boy; nor, that having known the young owner of Luscombe Abbey from his babyhood, it was only natural that he should give him a welcome. As Chris would have said, her mind was too full of little things, and she had too much time for brooding over them, and therefore all her molehills became mountains.

"You need not trouble, Francis," she said, "I have arranged it already. Miss Wulstan wishes to go into Kenchester this morning, and as I am sending her, Christina can be dropped on the way. Miss Luscombe has promised to send her back, so there is nothing more to think about."

She spoke in a tone of finality—the whole subject was now to be swept from every one's thoughts—and she was proceeding to announce the rest of her programme for the day, when Lennox remarked unconcernedly—

"And if you really want to see Hal, father, you can go over with me this afternoon. I told him I would have a look round the home coverts with him."

Lady Strafford got up abruptly, and sweeping her letters together, marched off to the library in high dudgeon; while Chris, feeling that she would only make matters worse by any interference, retired to the schoolroom, where she kept herself out of sight until Miss Wulstan was ready to start.

With Miss Wulstan, Chris felt that she should never get beyond a certain point. She admired her talents, and agreed with many of her views, but she very much disliked her aggressive attitude. Even if women had been kept in subjection in the past, brawling and scolding would do no good, and since Miss Wulstan lost no opportunity of bringing up the topic, Chris had plenty of chances for argument. She brought it up now as soon as they had started, for she had just seen an appeal in the morning paper for more women doctors, and she had much to say on the folly of expecting women to be prepared

now for work that they had all along been discouraged from doing. She ended up with the bitter remark that it would serve the men right if they refused to help them now that they were wanted. But Chris would not hear of this.

"I think that that would be very unpatriotic," she said. "The best revenge is to show how well we can work. Men have been policemen and letter carriers and railway-carriage cleaners and tramway conductors for years and years, and in one minute women have come in and done all their jobs without turning a hair. They are filling up all the gaps that are vacant to-day, and if women lawyers and merchants and bankers are needed to-morrow, you will see that they will manage to be ready to tackle those posts too."

Miss Wulstan, to do her justice, was always ready to listen to argument, and as the argument this time tended to the glorification of women, she was all the more good-humoured over it.

"You have a wonderfully clear way of putting things," she said, "and when you are older you will be a splendid champion of our cause."

"Oh, no, I shan't," said Chris bluntly. "I think it is just as silly to champion women against men as it is to uphold men against women; we are all human beings, and we have got to find some way of agreeing together and pulling together if we want to reform things, just as masters and men have got to find a way of pulling together if they want to solve industrial problems. Some people seem to think that we have no industrial problems in Australia, but that is quite a mistake. I have

heard no end of talk about it, and I know that there is nothing for it but for each side to look at the other's point of view."

If Stella had made that remark, Miss Wulstan would have said: "Don't quote second-hand opinions." But she had soon discovered that Chris's opinions were never second-hand; she had read much and heard much, but she had brought all the strength of her fresh young mind to bear upon what she read and heard.

"I wish I had your chance of a day with Miss Luscombe," said the governess, with a sigh as they drove up to the house. "She does not fall in with all the most modern ideas, but she is a thoroughly enlightened woman, and I have often been greatly struck by things I have heard her say. She is so very different to"—Lady Strafford, she was going to say, that was evident, but she did not say it, and Chris liked the good taste that made her pull up and alter the rest of her sentence—"different to those who think that their opinions are laws for the rest of the world." She paused a moment and then added in rather a wistful tone: "And though she is well-read and intellectual, she has not lost her feminine charm."

Why was there that wistful, lingering note in her voice? Did the inspiring and uplifting Mr. Venning sometimes hint that she was not quite the fairy vision that he might have desired? Chris wondered. But there was no way of finding out, and the next moment she was deposited on the steps and Miss Wulstan departed down the drive.

"I don't care for her, and yet I should be awfully

sorry if she was unhappy," said Chris to herself as she rang the bell. And then Miss Wulstan went completely out of her head, for Miss Luscombe came forward to greet her.

"I hope that you really like me to come?" she said, as her hostess took her hand and led her across the hall. "I thought that you would hardly want me to-day, when I heard that Mr. Luscombe had come home."

"Well, then, you thought wrong, for I want you very much," said Miss Luscombe. "My nephew is very busy, and I shall scarcely see him except at luncheon. He is so little at home that there are a thousand things for him to attend to when he does come. He is going over the farm accounts with the bailiff this morning, and this afternoon he means to go round the coverts—everything is very difficult now, for there are so few men left on the place. But we must not mind that; when we think what other countries are suffering it makes one feel ashamed to be doing so little."

But that was not how every one felt. Chris had been much taken aback only the previous day at hearing Lady Strafford say in answer to a remark of her husband's that she intended to keep the war at arm's length—"I shall not allow my life to be affected by it," had been her exact phrase—and since Rushfield was so quiet and retired a place and there happened to be no training camp in the neighbourhood, she was able to carry out her resolution to a great extent.

But Miss Luscombe seemed to feel that everybody ought to be a good deal more affected than they

were, and since this was Chris's own opinion, she had a sense of affinity with her hostess, and the caged-up feeling of which she was so conscious at Strafford Royal disappeared as if by magic.

"Come and sit under the trees," said Miss Luscombe, "and we will have a chat till lunch-time. I dare say you will wind some skeins for me. I want to finish off a consignment of socks and scarves for the North Sea, and it takes so long if I have to wind my wool as well as to knit it up."

Chris was only too glad to have some employment for her fingers, and while Miss Luscombe's knitting-pins flew, she wound ball after ball of the soft grey wool.

"Tell me about your father," said Miss Luscombe, and Chris told her fully and freely of those past days which were so precious to her—told her as she could never have told Lady Strafford, even though she had been that father's youthful adoration. She wondered whether Miss Luscombe knew that story, and following some secret impulse, she talked to her of their home in Sydney and of the mother who had been its life and light.

"She loved books better than father and I did," she said. "He used to tease her sometimes and tell her that she loved them more than she loved us; but that was only his fun, and she didn't mind it a bit. She used to tease him back again, and we were so happy together!"

"But you love books; don't you?" said Miss Luscombe. "I understand that you are very forward with your studies."

"I like them well enough," said Chris, "but I

don't love them for themselves as mother did. I read because I want to learn things that may be useful in my life, but mother used to read for the sake of reading."

"And what do you want to do with your life?"

"I want to do a great many things, but one thing more than all."

"And what is that one thing?"

"Well, I suppose it is the thing that most people want, though they describe it in all sorts of different ways. It is what Dickens wanted when he said that, as he looked at the Ducal Palace in Venice, he would rather be able to lay his hand in one tender, healing touch on the sorrows of the world than have all the wealth and the power of the Doges."

"And you think that that is what most people want?" said Miss Luscombe rather sadly. "I wish it were, for then the world would be a happier place than it is. I fear that wealth and power have strong attractions for only too many."

"But don't you think that the war has changed all that?" said Chris eagerly. "Just think what people are giving up and how they are sacrificing themselves!"

"Yes, I know they are, and I think that that is the great lesson that the war is teaching the world; but I am afraid that there are a great many who have not learnt it yet, and who will have to go through many more sorrows before they do learn it."

"But they will learn it in the end—you don't think that there is any doubt about that, do you? It would be so awful if the world were to be no better after all that pain and grief. Such thousands

of lives cannot have been given without our seeing some great harvest in the future."

Miss Luscombe laid down her knitting and looked long at the bright, girlish face, full of life and feeling.

"You are very young to think of these things," she said.

But Chris shook her head.

"Not so young as you think," she said. "I have had to do so many things and decide so many things which girls like Stella know nothing about, that it makes me ever so much older than I am if you count by years. I am about twenty-five in my feelings, and that is quite middle-aged."

Whether Miss Luscombe at fifty looked upon twenty-five as middle age was not quite so certain, but the conversation was interrupted at that moment by the sudden appearance of a young man who was coming along over the grass at a most determined pace.

"I really can't stay indoors another moment," he said. "I feel as if the ceiling was coming down on the top of my head. I hate accounts, and I can't see why I should have to do them when I have only five days' leave."

"And I can't see why you should forget your manners even if you hate being indoors," returned Miss Luscombe. "This is Miss Strafford, who has come from Australia to stay with her cousins."

Hal Luscombe held out his hand with a smile of greeting and a word of apology, and then flung himself down on the grass by his aunt's chair and lay staring up at the sky. He was a far more

typical-looking sailor than Lennox; his face was tanned and weather-beaten, his expression was as open as the sky that he loved, and his manner as breezy as the winds that were the breath of his life.

"I suppose everybody begins by asking you how you like England?" he said, casting a keen glance on Chris. "But I shall not do so, for all parts of the Empire are one to me—no matter where my ship goes I am always at home."

That was a sentiment after Chris's own heart, and she beamed so responsively that Hal set her down at once as a "jolly nice girl." He liked "jolly nice girls," as all good sailors do, but there was one girl who seemed to him to be jollier and nicer than all the rest, and her name was never long absent from his lips.

"I expect that you and Stella hit it off like a pair of lovebirds," he said, as he turned on his elbow to get a better view of Chris's face. "It must be ripping for you to have her, and I've no doubt that she is just as glad to have you, for now that Leila has a husband and a baby to fuss over, she would be no more good as a sister even if she were not in India."

A pair of lovebirds was not exactly how Chris would have described herself and Stella, so she answered the last part of his sentence.

"I don't wonder that Mrs. Dalrymple likes to fuss over her baby," she said; "he looks a perfect little duck in his photograph."

"As far as I have been able to observe, the human young is a most objectionable species," said Hal. "It certainly is in some respects like the duck, for

it is voracious in its habits and it makes a hideously unpleasant noise."

He spoke so solemnly that Chris thought him in earnest until she saw a twinkle in the corner of his aunt's eye.

"Will you believe it when I tell you what I found him doing only this morning?" said Miss Luscombe. "I went down to the keeper's lodge to see about some eggs, and seated in the garden was a young man who shall be nameless, the keeper's baby on his knee, and the keeper's wife standing beside him admiring his skill as a nurse. Don't you feel abashed, Hal?"

But he was not in the least abashed.

"The baby was such a duck that I had to hold it and pinch it to make it squeak," he said. "And as for the keeper's wife, she is so upset at her husband's being called up that she had no time to admire me or any one else."

"But I thought he was over age?" said Miss Luscombe.

"So he was until this last new regulation; I am afraid he will have to go. He is perfectly fit in health, and he is one of the best shots for miles round."

"Well, if he must go, he must," said Miss Luscombe. "I would not be the one to try and get him off; but things are getting very difficult. Women can fill numbers of the vacant posts, but I am afraid a feminine gamekeeper would be out of the question."

"Yes, I am afraid so too," said Hal; "but I am not at all sure that you won't come to a lady coachman. Old Jenkins is really getting past his

work, and I have no opinion of the lad he has got in Brown's place."

"Why, I thought he was such a smart young fellow?" said Miss Luscombe. "I know that he is rather lame, but unless he was ineligible for service we could not have him."

"His lameness does not matter," said Hal. "But I was in the stables this morning, and my impression is that he knows nothing about horses; he was handling them in the most clumsy fashion."

"If he is inefficient he must go, of course," said Miss Luscombe. "But perhaps he will improve. There is the luncheon bell—we must go in."

It was a very pleasant meal. There was none of that atmosphere of restraint that was such a trial to her at Strafford Royal, and though Hal had not Desmond's sympathetic nature, he was so natural and frank that Chris felt for the first time that she had found some one who fitted on to her old life; she could quite fancy Hal in the Back of Beyond, and she was certain that he and Mac would have been kindred spirits. She was really sorry when he got up from the table before the meal was over, saying that he must start at once if he was to be in time to meet Lennox at the place appointed; but her regrets did not last long, for Miss Luscombe took her for a tour of the house, and she found the old rooms with their secret doors and staircases so delightfully interesting that she would have liked to wander about for hours.

"I am afraid we must be going," said Miss Luscombe at last. "I told Lady Strafford that I would be there for tea, and I have an errand to do on the way. I have ordered the wagonette because

I want to take some blankets to a sick woman at an outlying cottage. It will make the drive rather long, but the horse can do it perfectly well."

Chris liked the look of the horse—a red roan, with long clean legs and an arching neck; and though Jonah was a grey roan, there was enough resemblance to make her hand linger on his glossy coat as she went to pat him.

"You are fond of horses?" said Miss Luscombe.

"I love them!" said Chris. "I miss the riding and driving as much as anything. Stella told me that I could drive her pony whenever I like, but it is so fat and drowsy that it is about as amusing as driving a sheep."

"Ginger is not a sheep, by any means," said Miss Luscombe. "But he has been well broken, and James seems to know how to manage him."

Chris did not feel quite so sure of that, but it was not for her to say anything, and they drove off and left their bundle and then turned into the road that led to Strafford Royal.

"We shall pass the plantations if we go this way," said Miss Luscombe; "it is a much prettier road than the other, and I expect that you have not seen it yet. We may meet Hal; they were to come out here after they had been through the home coverts."

It was indeed a pretty road, and Chris felt sorry that they were obliged to hurry back to Strafford Royal; it was so peaceful here, and though Lady Strafford had not said a word to her about her conversation with Lennox the night before, she felt sure that a rebuke would come sooner or later.

"There they are!" cried Miss Luscombe suddenly,

as she pointed to some figures in a distant field; and calling to James to stop, she waved her handkerchief to attract their attention. The road was narrow and a sharp bend prevented them from seeing what was coming, but while their eyes were still fixed upon the advancing group, a fierce hoot was heard and almost at the same moment a motor-car dashed round upon them, just shaving the wagonette as it passed. It was not surprising that Ginger should start, but it was very surprising that the driver should be so foolish as to drag at the reins and at the same time to cut at him with the whip. Away he flew, his head down, his feet hardly seeming to touch the ground, and though Miss Luscombe was too plucky to make a sound she went as white as a sheet.

As for James, he lost his head altogether, and letting the reins slip from his fingers, he clutched the rail beside him and screamed for help.

Hal, Lennox and the keeper were all strong men, thoroughly used to horses; but they were too far off for their help to be available, and though they ran at the top of their speed, Ginger flew ever faster and faster, while the wagonette rocked and swayed like a ship at sea.

And then suddenly they saw a white figure scramble over the rail on to the front seat, and while they dashed on, too breathless to cry out, their hearts failing them for fear, they saw it balance itself on the splashboard, take a flying leap forward, alight on Ginger's back, and flinging itself down, lie prone about his neck, while two small hands closed on the reins with a grip of iron.

CHAPTER XIII

BREAKERS AHEAD

THE next thing of which Chris was clearly conscious was Hal's voice saying, "Brought your ship into port that time and no mistake."

The surging in her ears was the noise of the waves, then, and the damp on her forehead must be salt sea spray. She lay and thought about that for a moment, and then her sight suddenly cleared and she saw that she was lying on the grass by the side of the road, with Miss Luscombe's arm under her head, while Hal was splashing water on to her forehead from his cap, which he had filled from the wayside brook. Lennox and the keeper were examining the foam-covered Ginger, and James stood leaning over a neighbouring gate, his face hidden and his shoulders shaking as if he were crying.

"Is any one hurt?" were her first words, and Hal answered promptly—

"No one, thanks to you. I never knew before that one human being could combine the qualities of a chamois and a steel trap."

That made her laugh, and she struggled up into a sitting posture, and then with the help of his hand got up on to her feet.

"Do you feel all right?" he said anxiously, and Miss Luscombe put an arm round her and held her close.

"Thank you for saving my life," she said in a low tone, and a thrill ran through the girl's veins. She loved Miss Luscombe with all her warm young heart, and there is no pleasure on earth to equal the rendering of a service to one we love.

"How are you going to get back?" said Lennox, coming up to them. "I don't know whether the horse is up to it."

"No, but he can get on to your place," said Hal. "We are two miles further from home than we are from you; if we take it at a slow pace he will do it all right. You had better drive, and I will look after my aunt and Miss Strafford. As for James, he had better take himself off."

Another writhe of the wretched James's shoulders and a stifled sound that very much resembled a sob. Chris's heart went out to him, and as Miss Luscombe walked on towards the wagonette she turned aside and laid her hand on his arm.

"The first time that I drove, I let the horse down," she said, "and my father was very angry with me. I can't tell you how bad I felt, but after a little while I could drive anything. It will be just the same with you."

He turned his face an inch or two in her direction, and she caught a glimpse of a scarlet, tear-stained cheek.

"If you and the mistress had been killed, I'd have gone and jumped in the river," he said.

"Well, but you see we weren't killed," said Chris

cheerfully. "So don't think about the river, but make up your mind to learn to drive."

He brightened up a little as she spoke, and though he evidently dreaded the walk back with the gamekeeper, he managed to give Chris a watery smile as the wagonette drove off.

Chris felt strangely tired now that the excitement was over, and as soon as they arrived at the house she escaped to her own room, for she knew that she had come to the end of her tether. It was as well for her that she did so, for Lady Strafford did not take the adventure in the way that might have been expected.

"I have had doubts all along whether Christina was a fit companion for Stella," she said, "and this extraordinary escapade confirms them. A girl who jumps over a splashboard on to a horse's back, cannot possibly be called a lady."

"No, but she may very certainly be called a heroine," said Hal drily.

If it had been one of her own children who made the remark, Lady Strafford would have treated it with contumely; but as it was, she looked at the speaker with a sudden increase of favour. Having sent for Chris of her own free will, she could not very well turn her adrift; but if their young neighbour should take a fancy to her, it would cut the knot of the difficulty.

"I am glad you think so," she said; and to the surprise of the others she really did seem glad, though why she should be so they could not imagine.

"Hadn't you better go and see if Chris is all right?" said Desmond aside to Stella. But Stella

was not inclined to leave the party in the drawing-room; she knew very well what Hal thought of her, in spite of the chaff that he showered upon her, and she did not choose to miss a minute of his company.

Desmond said no more, but slipping out of the room, he made his way to Simpson's quarters and in a few words told her the tale.

"It was a simply splendid piece of pluck," he said, "but it was nerve and will that did it, and she must be quite played out now. I wish you would go to her, or shall I ask Miss Wulstan?"

But Simpson was already on her feet.

"Miss Wulstan may be good at her books," she said; "that's her business, and I dare say she understands it; but I don't think she's any use for mothering people, and that's what is wanted now."

If it had been suggested to Chris at her first sight of Simpson that she would ever be "mothered" by her, she would have simply refused to believe it; but as she lay on her bed, weary and unstrung, a quiet step crossed her room and a gentle hand was laid on her forehead.

"I've heard what you've been doing, missy," said Simpson, "and I've brought you some tea. I'm going to sit here by you and see you drink it, for I know just how you feel I never had to jump on a horse's back when it was going full tilt, but I once went into the nursery and found Master Stephen with his little frock all ablaze while the nursemaid was gaping over a book, and by the time I'd put it out I was that sick and trembly I could hardly stand."

"Tell me about them when they were little," said Chris. "I never had any brothers and sisters."

She had quite forgotten to be afraid of Simpson, and it soothed her to have her chatting on in her homely way—the way that stood revealed as soon as the crust of propriety was broken through.

"Ah, it's bad to be lonely!" said Simpson. "I'm glad you've got such nice company now, for they're dear children, all of them, though I oughtn't to call them children now. I was her ladyship's maid from the time she married, and I loved her babies as if they were my own. Mr. Lennox was always like a little king from the moment he began to take notice of anything, and we were all more proud of him than I can tell you, for he was as handsome as a picture so that people used to turn round in the street to look at him."

Chris could believe that, and it was not surprising that Lennox should be autocratic now if he had been treated like a king from the days of his babyhood; but she could not honestly say that autocracy attracted her, and she was glad that Simpson did not wait for any reply.

"Mr. Desmond, he was quite different," she went on. "He let his brother ride roughshod over him, as you may say, and never thought of standing up for himself. I used to take his part sometimes, because Miss Leila came very soon after him, and being the first girl, she was made a great fuss over; so what with the one above him and the one below him, he was quite squeezed out, poor little mite, and I used to carry him off to my workroom when I

got a chance, for I knew he wasn't so naughty as the nurse made out."

"I can't imagine his ever being naughty," said Chris.

But Simpson did not take this entirely as a compliment.

"Oh, he's got plenty of spirit," she said; "don't you be deceived about that. He's as fine a young officer as ever stepped, and there was a beautiful piece written in the paper about what he did when he got his Cross. But he's never been one to blow his own trumpet, and he always thinks that people are better than what he is himself."

At that moment there was a knock at the door, and Miss Luscombe appeared on the threshold.

"I came to see how you are," she said, as she sat down in Simpson's vacated chair. "Do you think you could come downstairs now, or are you too tired? Hal would like to say good-bye to you before we go."

She had her own reasons for wishing to bring her down before she left, for she wanted to get the first meeting with Lady Strafford over while she was there to protect her. Chris would much rather have been allowed to remain where she was, but she saw that Miss Luscombe wished it, so she got up and bathed her face and hands and smoothed her hair.

Desmond's eyes brightened when he saw her come in, but he knew it was better to keep in the background, so he said nothing and left it to Hal to go forward to greet her.

"I know you don't want much fuss made about

what you did," said Hal, "but I shall never forget it—you may be sure of that."

Chris glanced at Lady Strafford, but to her surprise there was no disapproval on her face, and she felt relieved.

"Though she might have said a word to me herself," she could not help thinking. "It would only have been common politeness."

"I shall come over to tea to-morrow and then I shall see for myself how you are," said Hal, as he took her hand in a hearty grip; and Lady Strafford said to herself that the idea that had sprung up in her mind was receiving more encouragement than she could have expected. Chris was very young, of course, but she was a good deal older than her age, and after all she would be eighteen on her next birthday. She did not wish Stella to have any such notions put in her head, but that was quite different, for she was not a waif and stray as Chris was, tossed and tumbled about on the waves of fortune.

While she was making these complacent remarks to herself, Hal was murmuring in Stella's ear—

"Don't be jealous, old girl; I'm really coming to see you, though I'm more grateful to your cousin than I can ever say."

Stella was perfect in Hal's eyes and she knew it, but though she really had a plentiful share of faults and failings, jealousy was not one of them. She was as pretty as Chris, though in quite a different style, and the fact that she had been surpassed by her in the schoolroom was now not a trouble to her; she was beginning, in fact, to find Chris a very

interesting companion, and was honestly eager to hear all about the great event of the day.

But Chris did not care to talk about it, and seeing that she looked wearied and worried by Stella's questions, Desmond managed to break up their talk and get her out into the garden.

"I expect you would rather forget all that now," he said, "so I am going to bother you with my affairs, and tell you that I have had a talk with my father to-day about my foot."

"Oh, but that doesn't bother me," said Chris, looking up at him with a sudden gleam of interest. "I do so want your foot to get better, and I am sure there must be some cure for it—the surgeons are cleverer now than ever."

"Yes, I know they are," said Desmond; "that is one of the bright sides of the war. But all the same——" He paused a moment and looked at her searchingly. "Don't think that I am a coward, but if my service days are over, life will be at an end for me."

"Yes, but your service days will never be over," said Chris quickly. "You may be moved from one post to another, but there is no discharge."

He looked puzzled for a moment and then he sighed.

"Oh, yes, I see what you mean," he said. "There is always work to be done in the world, but I love my own work, and I don't want any other."

"But we can't always choose our work," said Chris. "I wouldn't worry about it if I were you; very likely your foot will be cured and then you will be able to get out to your regiment again. Tell me what your father said about it."

"Well, he was as kind as kind could be. He always is if you really speak to him about anything and get him to attend. He told me that I ought to have spoken before if I thought that more could be done for it; and I dare say I ought, but I couldn't explain all that to him."

It was his mother's want of sympathy that had hindered him. Chris knew that, and she liked to feel that he could make a friend of her.

"And are you to go to London?" she asked.

"Yes, I am going up with Lennox next week, and I shall go into a nursing home if the surgeons recommend special treatment. I wish now that I had taken the bull by the horns before. We shall start on Wednesday morning, I think. Hal and Lennox have the same amount of leave, but Hal is going back to his old ship, and Lennox has been transferred to the Mediterranean Fleet. I wish that mother would not shut her eyes to things as she does."

The last sentence came abruptly, and Chris could not quite understand its connection.

"What things does she shut her eyes to?" she asked.

Desmond shrugged his shoulders.

"To the dangers of war," he said. "She talks as if going to the Mediterranean was a kind of pleasure trip, and totally ignores the mines and the submarines."

"But don't you think that that is only her way of bearing up against the suspense and strain?" said Chris. "I fancy that a good many people meet it like that, and after all it is better than making great lamentations."

"Maybe," he said with a sigh. "But I never find that it does me any good to be told that things are not what they are; I think that the only way is to face them fairly and squarely."

"But not to meet them half-way?" returned Chris, for she suspected that the dread of losing his foot was weighing upon his mind.

"Yes, I think you are right there," he said slowly. "One is always told not to try and cross bridges before one gets to them, but I am always afraid that I shan't know how to cross the bridge when I do get to it unless I have thoroughly prepared myself beforehand."

"But don't you think that the inspiration comes with the emergency?" said Chris. "I did not know in the least how I was going to stop Ginger, but when I saw that zigzag hill in front of us and knew that there could be no chance for us unless he was pulled up, I understood in a moment how it might be done."

"Oh, yes—*you!*" said Desmond in a tone so full of feeling that Chris looked at him in surprise; but she had no time to answer, for their talk was interrupted at that point by a call from Lennox, and Desmond limped off in obedience to it, leaving her alone.

CHAPTER XIV

TWO HEARTS

LENNOX and Desmond were gone, and the blank in the house was felt by every one. Lady Strafford had been self-restrained to the last, and had said good-bye to her first-born with as much outward coolness as if he had been only going to London on a week's visit, but there were dark rings round her eyes and lines about her mouth that told tales to a watchful observer. She would have dearly liked to go up to town herself, but Lennox put a stop to that. He knew that it would be the very worst thing in the world for her to go through the ordeal in a London hotel where she had none of her own interests and occupations to take off her thoughts.

"Our little Australian has far more sympathy in her," he said to his brother as they discussed the matter, and Desmond wondered what his mother would have said if she could have heard that remark on the lips of her adored son.

"She has pluck as well as sympathy," he answered, and Lennox gave an emphatic nod.

"She has both in full measure," he said, "and I will tell you who thinks so—old Hal! He has fallen in and out of love a dozen times already, but I think he is fairly booked this time."

"Do you?" was all that Desmond vouchsafed on that topic. Like most self-complacent people, Lennox was so occupied with his own opinions that he was blind to the opinions of other people; while Desmond, never being anxious to assert his own beliefs, gained a much clearer idea of what was going on around him. He knew quite well where Hal's hopes were centred, but there would be time enough to talk of that by and by. No more leave could be expected for a long while to come, and when Hal came home next, Stella might be less flighty and headstrong.

It was not likely that Stella would look upon Chris from the same point of view as Desmond did, but she had never liked her so well as in the days following her brothers' departure. Now that she had no one else to consort with, they were thrown much together, and though she did not care for study, she was greatly interested in the frequent debates that took place between Chris and Miss Wulstan.

"I love to hear you score off her," she said delightedly one day, when Chris had brought up a formidable list of quotations to prove a disputed point about the position of Woman among the Greeks.

"I don't want to score off her," said Chris, "but what I can't make her see is that it would be just as bad for women to trample on men as it has been for men to trample on women."

"And what I can't make her see," said Stella, "is that Mr. Venning will kick like mad if she tries to put a bit in his mouth. She told me the other day that when they are married she is going to

institute what she calls communal housekeeping—by which she means that she is going to do the housekeeping one week while he attends to his writing, and he is to do it the next week while she gives lessons."

"She had much better let him do it altogether," said Chris, "it would save no end of friction. She told me the other day that such poets as Tennyson and Milton were terribly harmful because they thought that the only possible attitude for women was mild subjection."

"I wonder what mother would say if she knew that?" remarked Stella. "She adores Milton and Tennyson, and thinks that every nice girl ought to know them by heart."

Chris did not answer; she had taken up a pencil and paper and was scribbling away at a great pace, deaf to all Stella's questions and comments. She wrote on for a minute or two, and then flung herself back in her chair, flushed and smiling.

"I suppose you have read *In Memoriam?*" she said.

"Well, bits of it," said Stella. "My godmother gave me a copy in a lovely binding, but I found it horribly dull. I believe it is somewhere in this bookcase."

"Well, find it," said Chris, "and turn up the canto that begins—

'My love has talked with rocks and trees,'

You will like what I am going to read you better if you have the original to compare it with."

Stella seemed rather disinclined for so much

exertion; however, she did find the book, and turned the pages until she came to the required place.

"Fire away!" she said, and Chris took up her paper.

"It is not a parody," she said, "for not a single word needs changing; it is merely a transposition of pronouns, and if Tennyson had lived on to the present day I am sure he would have altered it himself. It exactly describes what Miss Wulstan and Mr. Venning will be after a few years of matrimony.

"These two, they dwelt with eye on eye,
Their hearts of old have beat in tune,
Their meetings made December June,
Their every parting was to die.

"Their love has never passed away,
The days he never can forget
Are earnest that she loves him yet
Whate'er the faithless people say.

"His life is lone, she sits apart,
She loves him yet, he will not weep,
Though rapt in matters dark and deep
She seems to slight his simple heart.

"She thrids the labyrinth of the mind,
She reads the secret of the star,
She seems so near and yet so far,
She looks so cold, he thinks her kind.

"He keeps the gift of years before,
A withered violet is his bliss;
He knows not what her greatness is,
For that, for all, he loves her more.

"For her he plays, to her he sings
Of early faith and plighted vows,
He knows but matters of the house,
And she—she knows a thousand things.

"His faith is fixt and cannot move,
He darkly feels her great and wise,
He dwells on her with faithful eyes—
'I cannot understand, I love!'"

Stella was shaking with laughter long before Chris had finished.

"It is simply too lovely for words," she said. "Miss Wulstan was telling me only the other day how fond he is of playing the piano."

"Have you ever seen him?" asked Chris.

"No, but I expect that we shall have the treat before long, for mother has told her that she may ask him to come here for a week-end before Christmas."

"That is very kind of her," said Chris, with some surprise.

"Oh, mother will always do things for people who give in to her," said Stella. "But I really don't see why she should bother to be nice to Miss Wulstan."

"I can't help liking her, for my part," said Chris.

"And I can't help disliking her," said Stella carelessly, "so that is the difference between us. But I think it will be great sport to see Mr. Venning. Give me those verses; I should like to send them to Desmond."

"Oh, no, they are only rubbish," said Chris, making a movement as if to tear up the paper.

But Stella snatched it out of her hand.

"Do let me send it to Desmond," she said. "He is awfully low in his mind, poor old boy, and I don't wonder, for the doctors think that his foot will have to come off."

"Come off!" exclaimed Chris in a tone of horror.

"Yes. Mother had a letter from the doctor this morning; he says that Desmond has been going about on it when it ought to have been perfectly still, and he has very little hope of saving it. Father is very upset, because he thinks he ought to have taken more notice of it."

"And what does Desmond say about it?"

"Oh, he has only written a few lines; he does not say anything except that if the foot can't be saved he must make up his mind to do without it, but I know he feels awfully bad. Mother won't believe that there is any real fear of it, and she is much more upset at the news about the submarines in the Mediterranean, even though Lennox's ship is not anywhere near the place where this last liner was sunk."

"But won't she go to London to be near him?"

"No, I don't think so, she hates leaving home; but I expect father will go and perhaps that will be better."

It would be a good deal better—so Chris thought, and she was very glad when a day or two afterwards Sir Francis took his departure. He was gone some time before any definite news arrived, and when it did come, Lady Strafford took it very composedly.

"It is a great pity that the foot must come off," she said, "for he was doing very well in the Army; but no doubt they will find him some sort of post as soon as he is well enough."

"And the operation is to be on Saturday," said Stella, picking up the letter. "I wish you had not

to put Mr. Venning off, I had been looking forward to seeing him."

"Why should I put him off?" asked Lady Strafford.

Stella looked considerably taken aback.

"Well, I should have thought that you would scarcely want a stranger here at an anxious time like that."

"Mr. Venning will not interfere with us, he is Miss Wulstan's guest," said Lady Strafford. "And as for anxiety, the amputation of a foot is a very simple matter—hundreds of men have had to undergo it, and the manufacture of artificial limbs has become such a fine art that the loss can hardly be detected."

That might be true, and yet when Chris thought of Desmond's eager longing to go back to his work, she could not feel that the loss of a foot was a simple matter. She had a strong idea, however, that Lady Strafford was much more concerned than she let herself appear, and when Stella complained later on in the day that she had been sharply pulled up for something that she had often done before without reproof, Chris replied that that was a sure sign of worry and that it ought not to be resented.

"Well, all I can say is that I wish mother would not choose that form of worrying," said Stella.

Stella's form of worrying was an altogether different one, but Chris was not certain that she did not dislike it more. She was in abnormally high spirits, laughing and joking incessantly, and driving Miss Wulstan wild by remarks that were on the borderline of impertinence.

"Oh, do let me alone!" she said, when Chris told her bluntly that her conduct was outrageous. "It's the only way that I can forget about Desmond. You can't understand how I feel, of course, for you've got no brothers."

Chris said no more after that, but she was thankful when Saturday came at last, for whatever the issue might be, certainty was less wearing than suspense. It was more than probable that Lady Strafford wished in her heart that Mr. Venning was not coming, but she would not have allowed it for worlds; he was to arrive at half-past three, and since the operation was to be done at twelve it was most likely that the telegram and the visitor would come together. Everybody was restless that morning, everybody was strained and difficult, and the most restless, strained and difficult of the party was Miss Wulstan, who was secretly regretting that she had been misguided enough to expose her betrothed to the criticisms of the family.

"It would not be half so bad if it was summer-time," said Stella, as she lounged idly at the hall window, watching for the arrival; "but what on earth shall we do with him now?"

"Don't make absurd remarks," said Lady Strafford, looking up from the newspaper that she was reading in an arm-chair by the fire. "It does not rest with us to do anything with Mr. Venning; Miss Wulstan will take him out for a walk, and after dinner they will sit in the schoolroom. To-morrow they are going over to Kenchester for the cathedral service, and on Monday morning he returns to town."

At that moment the pony cart, drawn by the

sheep that Chris so much despised, appeared in sight, and Stella sheltered behind the window curtain that she might get a good view of the occupants.

"Chris, do come!" she said in a tone of suppressed merriment. "He really is the very weirdest being."

But Chris did not move, and Stella glanced at her angrily.

"You really have an awful way of setting yourself up," she said. "He is fair game, if any one ever was; his nose is a beak and his hair looks like feathers, and as for his eyes——" But here she was obliged to stop, for at that moment the door opened and the pair appeared on the threshold.

Miss Wulstan seemed a mere embodiment of discomfort. Mr. Venning was much more at his ease, but he was so curiously unattractive that it was impossible to feel much interest in him. Lady Strafford at any rate showed no interest; she held out some cold fingers and made a frigid remark about the weather, and then took up the paper and went on reading.

Chris felt indignant, but she could not put herself forward, and when Stella went up with her greeting she felt more indignant still, for its cordiality hardly veiled its mockery. She said little herself, but there was a gentleness in her manner that made both Miss Wulstan and Mr. Venning feel suddenly grateful to her; and she was wondering whether she could venture to suggest an adjournment to the schoolroom and thus remove them from the danger zone, when the door from the back regions opened and the butler appeared, a salver in his hand.

"The telegram!" exclaimed Stella, rushing towards him, but he swerved politely away from her and presented the salver to his mistress.

Both Stella and Chris believed that Lady Strafford was quite capable of reading and then pocketing it without a word; but they were wrong, for when it had been carefully perused two or three times, she looked up at the butler who stood waiting near her chair.

"There is no answer," she said. And then looking round at the others, she added: "The operation has been successful, and all is going well so far."

Not one little message in answer! If it had been possible, Chris would have fired off a heartfelt congratulation to Sir Francis. She did not even know whether to venture a remark, but while she waited, Stella relieved the tension with a joyful shout.

"Hooray! I feel as if a ton weight had been taken off the top of my head!" she exclaimed.

Lady Strafford looked at her over her glasses.

"You seem to forget that a successful operation means that he has lost his foot," she said. She got up and crossed the hall to the library, shutting the door behind her.

She did care about Desmond's trouble, then! Chris knew that directly, and her heart went out to the stern, silent mother, who seemed so impervious to all ordinary feeling; but Stella was conscious of nothing but the relief of being freed from a disapproving atmosphere, and her pent-up emotions found vent in a flood of jokes and nonsense that caused Mr. Venning to look at her with some alarm.

"Would you like to come round the garden?"

said Miss Wulstan, and he caught at the suggestion gladly.

"Did you ever see such a specimen?" cried Stella, almost before they were out of hearing. "He really ought to be put in a museum and labelled, 'The Modern Woman's Ideal.' He gazes at her as if he were a frightened rabbit and she was a snake, but of course that is the right attitude from her point of view."

"I don't think you do either of them justice," said Chris stoutly. "He is not handsome, certainly, but I fancy that there is a good deal more in him than you think, and I am sure that much of Miss Wulstan's talk is only talk, and that she really thinks no end of him."

The day ended better than it had begun, and as the next morning was fine and dry, Miss Wulstan was able to carry Mr. Venning off to Kenchester. Chris hoped that they would not return till dinner-time so that Stella might have no chance of making them uncomfortable; but as ill-luck would have it, the day turned wet and they appeared again soon after luncheon. The rain came down in such torrents in the afternoon that a second church-going was not possible, and as Lady Strafford shut herself up in the library, Chris had her work cut out for her to prevent Stella from molesting the pair in the schoolroom.

"What an utter owl you are!" said Stella crossly. "I wish Stephen was at home, he and I would have some fun together. If you will insist on being so slow, I must do what I can by myself."

To remonstrate would only make her worse—

Chris felt sure of that; so she let her alone and heaved a sigh of relief when the day was over. Mr. Venning was to go off by an early train, and they would not see him again, so there was nothing more to dread.

But while she was dressing next morning, there was a knock at her door, and she paused in her hair-brushing and called out, "Come in." She guessed that it was Stella come to let off the remainder of her spirits, but to her surprise it was Miss Wulstan, pale and agitated and with very red rims round her eyes.

"I suppose that you had some reason for your cruelty," she said, "though what it can be I cannot imagine; but I wish you to know that Mr. Venning and I have parted."

Chris was so utterly taken aback that she could not find breath to speak, and seeing that she did not reply, Miss Wulstan went on—

"You need not stand there looking at me as if you did not know what I meant. Stella did not behave very nicely, but she was upset about her brother, and Mr. Venning realized that and took no notice of her nonsense; but you drew him out, you talked to him and pretended to take an interest in what he said, and all the time you were preparing to stab him in the back."

Chris felt more mystified than ever; she could only believe that it was an hysterical hallucination on Miss Wulstan's part, but to say so would merely make matters worse.

"Will you tell me what I have done?" she said at last.

"Oh, it is no use to make out that you don't know," said Miss Wulstan bitterly. "Nor is it any good to profess innocence—I know your handwriting too well for that."

"My handwriting!" said Chris, more and more puzzled every moment.

"Yes, your handwriting. You thought yourself very clever, no doubt, but it was nothing short of fiendish to write those verses and put them in Mr. Venning's way. Nothing that I could say would convince him that they did not represent my point of view; and then he declared that I must have ridiculed him to my pupils, or they would not have dared to say that while I knew a thousand things, he only knew matters of the house. He has gone away vowing that he will never see me again, and I hope it may make you happy to know that you have broken my heart and ruined my life."

She ended with a sudden wild sound that was something between a sob and a shriek, then turning quickly, bolted out of the room.

CHAPTER XV

A STORM IN A TEA-CUP

"SUCH a proceeding would be bad enough at any time, but when there is trouble and anxiety in the house it is infinitely worse. I cannot imagine how you can have been so heartless."

Miss Wulstan had gone straight to Lady Strafford with her story, and Lady Strafford had lost no time in summoning Chris to the library, that solemn apartment in which she transacted all her business and administered rebuke to any delinquent member of her household.

Her words stabbed the girl to the quick; she had shared in the present trouble and anxiety to the full, and her affectionate nature made her feel the strongest desire to have a part in all the family concerns. She longed to say that she would rather have cut her hand off than have added a featherweight to the burden; but her tongue was tied by the fact that to excuse herself would be to accuse Stella. She had gone to Stella's room directly Miss Wulstan left her and told her of the catastrophe, but Stella had taken it very coolly.

"He will come back all right," she said. "It was only a joke, and a joke never does any real harm."

"But it was a joke that I don't think that you had any right to play," returned Chris. "To begin

with, they were my verses and not yours, and I don't think you ought to have shown them without asking my leave."

"Dear me! How important we are!" said Stella in a provoking tone. "As a matter of fact they were Tennyson's verses, and neither yours nor mine. I meant to send them to Desmond, and then somehow I forgot it, and I found them in my desk yesterday afternoon and read them over again, and they seemed to fit Mr. Venning with such utter perfection that I thought it was a great pity he should not see them."

"And you actually went and gave them to him?"

"I am not quite an idiot, my dear! No, I did not give them to him, but while they were downstairs I nipped into the schoolroom and laid the paper where they could not help seeing it, and then nipped out again."

There was not the slightest contrition in her tone, and Chris felt rather helpless.

"If you had seen Miss Wulstan's despair, you could not have helped feeling sorry for her," she said.

"Oh, yes, I could. People should not get into despair about a mere joke. You might have quoted some other lines of Tennyson's to her—

> 'Blessings on the falling out
> That all the more endears!'

She and her Venning will be all the more blissful when they have had the excitement and romance of a tiff."

It was clearly of no use to say any more to her, and Chris went back to her room and finished her dressing, feeling very sore. She hated to think of

Miss Wulstan's unhappiness, and moreover, she could not get over the fact that her confidence had been betrayed.

Breakfast was a gloomy meal; Miss Wulstan did not appear, and Lady Strafford sat at the head of the table, withdrawn into herself as into a fortress. She passed Stella a letter from her father to read, but it was only by Stella's disjointed comments that Chris gathered that the operation had been a severe one, that the doctors hoped that Desmond was doing well, and that there was every chance of his recovery if he had the utmost care and attention. No word was addressed to herself, and she was not surprised, when Lady Strafford rose from the table, to be requested to follow her to the library.

There she found herself in a great difficulty. It was not so much the writing of the verses as the showing of them that was the offence, and if Stella had chosen to keep silence how could she fasten the blame upon her? She was sorely tempted to do so, but she resisted the temptation to clear herself at another's expense: if she had not shown her the verses she could not have made mischief with them. She had allowed her to take them to send to Desmond when it would have been much better to destroy them, and perhaps it was fair that she should be held responsible for them.

Her brain was busy while Lady Strafford talked, and when silence came she had made up her mind to accept the position. If she could induce Stella to confess on her own account, that would be another matter, but until she chose to do that, there was nothing to be done.

"What really matters is that things should be made right between Miss Wulstan and Mr. Venning," she said, when Lady Strafford had finished. "Do you think he would change his mind if I wrote and told him that she had nothing to do with it—that it was just an idea that came into my head?"

Lady Strafford looked rather taken aback.

"What really matters is that you should see how exceedingly wrongly you have behaved," she said in her severest tones. "Harm of this kind is often irreparable, and I feel very doubtful whether it can be put right; even if they should be reconciled they will always have a most painful remembrance of you."

This was scarcely encouraging, but Chris would not let herself be turned aside from her purpose. One last effort she would make to rouse Stella's conscience, and if that failed she would go to Miss Wulstan with a letter of apology.

It did fail, as she had known beforehand that it would; not that Stella wished Chris to be sacrificed in her stead, but that she thought the idea of any sacrifice an absurd one.

"It is only a storm in a tea-cup," she said contemptuously. "Mr. Venning will forget all about it, and they will love one another better than before; and as for mother's anger, it will soon blow over and no one will be a penny the worse."

"Very well, I shall say no more," said Chris. "I would have owned up if I had been in your place, but you see it differently and there is an end of it."

"But you won't write a letter, will you?" said Stella.

"Certainly I shall; I am going to do it at once."

She marched out of the room, and Stella did feel a little uncomfortable then, but she could not make up her mind to eat humble pie; and while she was still debating the point with herself, Chris had dashed off her letter and gone to the study with it in her hand.

Miss Wulstan sat at her desk awaiting the hour for lessons; her head rested on her hand and her eyes were red and heavy, but she had quite regained her composure, and when she looked up at the opening of the door, her gaze was calm and steady.

"There is still ten minutes before the time for commencement," she said, and then she dropped her head in her hand again.

"I know there is," said Chris, as she advanced to the desk. "I came in early because I wished to show you this letter."

She held it out as she spoke, but though Miss Wulstan looked at it she did not take it.

"I have been writing to Mr. Venning," went on Chris courageously. "You say that he thinks you made fun of him to us or we should not have dared to ridicule him, and it is not right that he should think that, because it is not true."

Miss Wulstan's cheek grew a shade paler and her lip trembled.

"The mere fact that he thinks such a thing possible shows that it would be wasted labour to try and convince him, nor should I wish to do so," she said.

So that was the sorest point of all! Chris understood in a moment that it was not her own conduct, but Mr. Venning's, that was driving Miss Wulstan to despair; she might have been as impertinent, ill-bred and tactless as she liked, if only he had taken

a different line. She wished her letter had been couched in even stronger terms, but the great thing now was to get it off without delay.

"Even if what I have written does not convince him, I should like it to go," she said. "I know that he is feeling awfully miserable now because you are unhappy, and perhaps he will forgive me for your sake."

She held out the letter again, and this time Miss Wulstan took it from her and ran her eye over it.

"DEAR MR. VENNING,

"Miss Wulstan has told me what happened this morning, and I want to write at once and say how very sorry I am that you should have seen those stupid verses. It was just an idea that came into my head one day, when I was looking at *In Memoriam;* I had seen a remark in some paper about the woman of the future, and I thought how funnily the lines would read if one turned the pronouns round the other way. But I ought not to have left it about, and I don't wonder you were angry if you thought it was meant to make fun of you. I am showing this letter to Miss Wulstan, and if she is kind enough to forgive me, I hope that you will do so too."

"Yours regretfully,
"CHRISTINA STRAFFORD."

Miss Wulstan's face cleared as she read. She had expected that the letter would contain allusions to her misery and entreaties that he would return to console her; but on the contrary, it said little about her beyond showing that she had had nothing to do with the offending verses. There was a different

tone in her voice when she spoke, and Chris felt so relieved that she almost forgot her own humiliation.

"You have written a very proper letter," she said. "Of course I cannot tell what he may think of it, but I will give you his address, and it can be posted at once."

She did care that he should be convinced, then! Chris had never really thought otherwise, but she had not believed that Miss Wulstan would admit it. She must love him very much, and notwithstanding all her protestations as to the modern woman's complete independence of man in the abstract, she was as dependent upon Mr. Venning's affection in the concrete as the most old-fashioned of her sex.

"And I expect that that is how things will work out," said Chris to herself, while with her outward ears she was listening to a lecture on Political Economy. "The old order may change, and ways and customs alter out of all knowledge, but man's heart and woman's heart will not alter, for God made them both out of His own great heart, and so they will go on understanding one another till the end of time."

She settled down comfortably to the Political Economy after that, more comfortably a good deal than Stella, whose conscience was very uneasy in spite of her obstinate silence; but Stella had a good deal of her mother's nature, and it was almost impossible for her to own herself in the wrong.

Lady Strafford's keen sense of decorum and propriety was outraged by the thought that a guest had been insulted under her roof, and though she saw that Miss Wulstan was at any rate partially reconciled to her pupil, she treated Chris with a

most marked coldness during the days that followed. Chris took the less notice of it because her mind was occupied with wondering what response Mr. Venning would make to her letter, and as the week went by she began to fear that her effort had been in vain.

She looked on the hall table as usual when she came down on Saturday morning, but there was no letter for her, and she went on into the breakfast-room with rather a cold sinking at her heart. Surely he would have answered by now if he meant to answer at all, and Lady Strafford's warning that such harm was often irreparable, echoed dismally in her ears.

But when Miss Wulstan entered the room her fears suddenly dispersed, for such a bright ray of happiness shone in the eyes that had been so dull and dead all through the week that she knew at once that all was well.

Miss Wulstan would not have confessed it for worlds, but she had come down early every morning in the hope of finding a letter, and when each morning her hopes had been disappointed, she had gone back to her room and shed a few wretched tears and then pulled herself together for the work of the day. But on this morning the familiar handwriting had met her eye; she recognized it before she was half-way down the staircase, and snatching up the treasure, she had rushed back again with it and read it with eyes so dim with joy that she could hardly decipher the words.

Lady Strafford would probably not have noticed anything in any case, but she was so much absorbed in a letter from her husband that she took no heed of what was passing around her. The moment that

she had gone off to the library, Miss Wulstan seized upon Chris.

"Come up to the study," she whispered, and Chris was only too glad to follow her, for she had been devoured by suspense all through the meal. And there the first thing that happened was that Miss Wulstan put her arms round her neck and kissed her. She was so astonished that her breath was quite taken away, and she stood silent while Miss Wulstan told her tale in a voice that sounded strangely unsteady.

"It is all right," she said. "I can't read you the letter, but he feels that he was too hasty and that he ought not to have accused me as he did. He asks me to thank you for your letter and to say that he shall put the whole thing out of his mind, and that he hopes you may never yourself feel the pain that you have inflicted on other people."

It was not Chris who had inflicted the pain, but having made up her mind to take the blame, she was obliged to take the forgiveness as well, and she consoled herself with the thought of Miss Wulstan's recovered happiness.

"I told you that it would be a case of—

'Blessings on the falling out,
That all the more endears,'"

said Stella when Chris spoke to her about it.

"Yes, but they would never have made it up if I had not sent that letter of apology," said Chris.

But even now Stella would not give in.

"I don't see how you can tell that," she said. "I always said that it was a storm in a tea-cup, but you wouldn't listen to me. However, it is all over now, so it is not worth talking about it any more."

Not from Stella's point of view, perhaps, but Chris felt that there was a good deal more that might very well be said about it. She did not so much mind what Mr. Venning thought of her, but she knew that she should hate Sir Francis to hear the story, and if it came to Miss Luscombe's ears, she felt that she could never look her in the face again. She wondered whether Lady Strafford would think it her duty to tell, but beyond the judicial remark that she was glad to hear that Mr. Venning had been kind enough to forgive her, Lady Strafford said no more. Indeed she had little time to give to any one else's affairs, for the London doctors were of opinion that Desmond would recover more quickly in the country, and they were anxious to send him down to Strafford Royal in an ambulance. There was much to do before his arrival, for he was to sleep downstairs so that he could be wheeled out into the verandah, and two rooms had to be got ready for himself and the nurse.

If it had been summer-time it would have been less of a business, but the December days were damp and cold, and there was a grand turning about and getting ready of beds and furniture. Lady Strafford seemed to resent the commotion deeply; but Chris had begun to suspect that when she was most unapproachable she was really hiding some secret worry or anxiety, and it was sympathy that she felt for her, not indignation.

"If it was Lennox, mother wouldn't mind how much the house was turned topsy-turvy," said Stella one day; and though Chris let the remark go by without comment, she said to herself: "If it was Lennox, she wouldn't have to reproach herself with having neglected his foot."

And there Chris hit the nail upon the head: it was secret remorse that was fretting Lady Strafford, though she had snubbed her husband violently when he had ventured to remark in one of his letters that they ought to have taken the matter up sooner.

"Desmond is not a child, and he could have spoken if he felt that everything was not being done," she had written. But all the same, she knew exactly what Chris knew—that if it had been a question of Lennox's foot, she would have moved heaven and earth in its behalf.

At last the day arrived when all was ready. The whole household waited anxiously for the first sound of the motor. There had been an unspoken fear that Desmond might never return; and now that fear was removed, and Stephen, who was home for a few days before going to a training camp, was in the highest spirits, egging Stella on to all sorts of mischief.

Then the hoot of a horn was heard and the ambulance appeared in sight, coming up the drive at a careful and steady pace; it stopped before the door and a couple of stretcher-bearers sprang down, while Sir Francis alighted and stood watching anxiously as the prostrate figure was lifted out. Stephen and Stella were very quiet when they saw that. Somehow they had imagined that as Desmond was able to come back, he would be very much as he was when he went away—lame, of course, but ready and eager to share in all the life of the house. But the Desmond who was lifted out of the ambulance was white and rigid, with closed eyes whose lids did not lift to greet them, and with pale lips that made no attempt to move in answer to their welcome home.

CHAPTER XVI

A WAR-TIME CHRISTMAS

CHRIS had read many a tale about Christmas in the old country, and she had always felt that she should like the festivities of the season much better in the frost and snow of an English winter than she did in the scorching glare of an Australian summer. The descriptions of the holly-decked houses and churches, of the blazing Yule logs and generous Christmas fare carried to the homes of the sick and poor, of the waits singing their carols, struck her as delightfully quaint and picturesque, and she had been ready to echo the words of one of Australia's best-known poets—

"It is not quite a Christmas here with this unclouded sky,
This pure transparent atmosphere, this sun mid-heaven high,
To see the rose upon the bush, young leaves upon the trees,
And hear the forest's summer hush or the low hum of bees."

But though Christmas at Strafford Royal had always been hitherto a time of brightness and gaiety, with a house full of merry young people and much kind thought for poorer neighbours—presents for the children, food for the hungry and comforts for the sick—the Christmas that Chris found awaiting her

was unlike any that had gone before it. The kind thought for others was there in full measure—in added measure, for the war had brought so much suffering in its train that there was all the more need for help and sympathy; but the brightness and gaiety were gone, for with Lennox threatened by mines and submarines in the Mediterranean, and Desmond lying white and wasted in his bed, who could think of putting up decorations or planning festivities?

Desmond, too, had suffered from the journey, and a bad attack of pain was followed by high temperature; and Stephen, who had many fine qualities, but was rather above himself at the present moment with excitement and importance at having left school before his time and becoming an officer in His Majesty's forces, took pleasure in teasing and chaffing Chris in a way that made it rather difficult for her to keep her temper.

The weather was wet and windy, instead of being clear and frosty with a red sun tinging the snow, as the Christmas cards that had drifted out to Australia had represented. If Stephen could have skated on the lake, or shot rabbits in the fields, or gone for long rides, his superfluous energy would have been used up; but as it was, the gloom and anxiety that pervaded the house got upon his nerves and made him a most trying companion. Not that Stella would acknowledge that he was a trying companion, her twin brother was so much a part of herself that all his ways were justified to her; but the effect upon her was that she became trying too, so that Chris's life was not a particularly comfortable one.

"I don't think that Chris looks as bright as

she used to do," said Sir Francis to his wife one day.

"I am not surprised that you should think so," returned Lady Strafford. "No one can look or feel bright with a guilty conscience."

"What do you mean by that?" demanded Sir Francis. "I think that she is one of the most delightful girls I have ever come across."

"I dare say you do. Men never see below the surface. I had such cause for anger with her while you were away that I very nearly packed her off for good and all. But that does not matter now—it is not at all important, and I want to talk to you about the farm. The bailiff says that unless he can get some more labour, he shall be obliged to let some of the land go out of cultivation."

"I should be sorry for that," said Sir Francis. "I will go down and have a talk with him. But I want to know what you mean about Chris; it is very important that all should go well with her while she is under our roof."

Lady Strafford felt a sting of resentment at his words. To begin with, it was her roof, and Chris was the child of her cousin, and therefore her concern and not his; and moreover, she was annoyed at the suggestion that she was indifferent to her welfare. She had not meant to speak of the affair with Miss Wulstan to any one, but she was provoked into doing it now.

"You are a great deal too lenient with her," she said. "But I did not intend to tell you her latest performance, because I know how it would shock you. However, perhaps it is best that you should hear it, that you may know what she really is. I

was very glad to invite Mr. Venning here, for I have a great regard for Miss Wulstan, and as she has no home of her own, I knew that it would be everything to her to have a day or two with him here. He came; and with the most flagrant disregard of all good taste and good feeling, Christina wrote some flippant verses turning him and Miss Wulstan into ridicule, and put them on Miss Wulstan's table, so that they were bound to see them when they went to sit in the study."

Sir Francis did indeed look shocked, but to her annoyance he also looked slightly incredulous.

"How do you know that Chris wrote the verses?" he asked.

Lady Strafford drew herself up.

"My dear Francis, do you imagine that I should say such a thing unless I had positive proof of it? The verses were in her handwriting, and when she was taxed with it she did not deny it. There were the most painful scenes—Mr. Venning left the house declaring that he would never see Miss Wulstan again, and I feared that the poor thing would go absolutely off her head with grief and despair."

"But why was he never going to see Miss Wulstan again if it was Chris who wrote the verses?"

"Because he said that Miss Wulstan must have spoken disrespectfully of him to her pupils, or they would never have dared to make fun of him."

"What an ass he must be!" remarked Sir Francis.

"If you are going to take it in that way, of course there is no use in my saying any more," said Lady Strafford. "You are like Stella, who when I tried

to make her see the enormity of it, would only say that it was a storm in a tea-cup."

"Well, I think she is about right," said Sir Francis. "But I am not really competent to say, because I haven't seen the verses."

"You had better look at them, then; Miss Wulstan brought them to me, and I read them with absolute disgust. The only excuse for Christina is that she has been brought up in utterly uncivilized surroundings."

That sounded strong, and Sir Francis wondered what shameless production he was about to see; but when the paper was put into his hand and he had run his eye over it, he broke into irrepressible laughter.

"But that is really awfully funny," he said. "Don't you see what she has done? She has turned round the pronouns in one of the cantos of *In Memoriam*. It ought to go to *Punch*."

Lady Strafford looked more annoyed than ever; no reader of poetry herself, she had not recognized the verses, but she did not choose to admit it.

"I cannot see that that makes the slightest difference to the point at issue," she said. "It matters nothing how the verses were produced, but what does matter is that they were produced, and that they were meant to cause pain."

"They ought not to have been shown, certainly," said Sir Francis; "but how do you know that they were not left on the table by accident?"

"Because I know that Miss Wulstan never allows any one but herself to touch her own private table. If they had been found on Chris's desk, it would have been a different thing; but as it was, it was

clearly intentional, and no arguments or excuses can alter the fact. Besides, as I have told you already, she not only owned to it, but wrote a letter of apology to Mr. Venning."

"You did not tell me about the letter," said Sir Francis. "What did she say and what did Venning reply?"

"I cannot tell you exactly what she said, because the letter was sent off before I knew anything about it; but Miss Wulstan told me that it was a very proper letter, and Mr. Venning was good enough to receive it in a very kind spirit."

"So the storm has blown over and the tea-cup is once more at peace," remarked Sir Francis.

Lady Strafford got up from her chair with an impatient gesture.

"It is not the least use talking to you," she said. "I did not expect anything else from Stella, for girls always hang together; but I thought that you, at least, would have been more concerned for the honour of the house."

She turned towards her writing-table as she spoke, and Sir Francis walked out of the room without making any further remark. The paper was still in his hand, and as he crossed the hall he thrust it into his pocket—he would give it back to his wife at some other time, he really could not face her again just now. He felt sore with her and disappointed with Chris, more disappointed than he cared to own, and altogether he was not in a very happy frame of mind. But as he made his way to his study the current of his thoughts was changed, for the passage that led to it led also to the rooms that had been prepared for Desmond, and as he opened his

own door the nurse opened the one next to it and closed it behind her.

She was a pleasant-faced, middle-aged woman, who not only did her work well, but got on well with all around her. She had had the good sense to treat Simpson as a friend from the first; and Simpson, who had been ready to resent her as a rival, was quite disarmed, and set the tone to the rest of the household. Sir Francis liked her and trusted her, but he did not feel inclined for conversation with any one just now, and he would have gone on into his study after a word of greeting if Nurse Morrison had not made it clear by her manner that she wanted to speak to him.

"I hope you are satisfied with your patient's progress?" he said.

"Well, no, Sir Francis, I can't say that I am," said Nurse Morrison dubiously. "I am afraid that the loss of his foot weighs upon him a great deal more than he lets us know. I don't mean that he worries about himself so much, but he can't bear to think that he won't be able to go back to the trenches. When I tell him that his new foot will be such a success that people will hardly notice that he is lame, he says that that is not what he minds about, and that he could have put up with any sort of wound that would not have made him unfit for active service. He is so weak still that he has no power of getting away from the thought."

"He has never given me any hint of it," said Sir Francis.

"No, I dare say not, and I expect he would be very angry with me if he knew what I am telling you now. I don't think that I have ever had a

patient who put himself so much aside; his one wish seems to be not to distress you and Lady Strafford."

The last words came out with a little hesitation, for in Nurse Morrison's private opinion it would have been a very good thing if Lady Strafford could be distressed about her son. Sir Francis's quick ear noted the hesitation, and he understood it perfectly.

"I am glad that you have told me this," he said. "It is a difficult matter to deal with, but I will keep it in mind. What is he doing now? Are you ready for visitors yet?"

"Yes, we are quite ready now; the room has been done, and I thought I would go out for my walk as soon as some one came to sit with him."

"Very well, I will stay with him while you go," said Sir Francis. "I must write some letters, but I can do them just as well in his room."

The nurse's words had troubled him greatly, and there was an anxious look on his face as he entered the room and went up to his son's bedside. Desmond was lying back on his pillows, a book in his hand, but he was not reading, and the tone in which he answered the questions addressed to him had a resolute patience about it that troubled his father still further. Sir Francis tried several topics, but they none of them seemed to rouse any interest; and giving up the attempt at last, he was just about to begin his writing, when taking out of his pocket a letter that needed a reply, he drew out with it the unfortunate verses.

"It is no breach of confidence when so many people know it," he said to himself, and turning back to the bed, he held them out to Desmond.

"There have been great disturbances going on while we have been away," he said. "Just read these and tell me what you think Chris deserves for writing them."

He was glad to hear the little chuckle of amusement with which Desmond read the verses—so glad, that for the moment he felt inclined to fall in with his verdict: "She deserves a round of applause—they are uncommonly smart."

But the feeling was no more than momentary, for though he had said little, he had fully shared his wife's horror at the idea of any discourtesy towards a dweller in the house, and sitting down beside Desmond, he told him the whole story.

"I don't believe it," was Desmond's instant rejoinder.

Sir Francis looked and felt considerably taken aback.

"That is hardly the way to speak about an assertion of your mother's," he said. "She would not say such a thing without good grounds."

But Desmond would not budge from his position.

"I have no doubt that she believes it," he said; "but that does not make it true. I don't believe for a moment that Chris is the kind of girl who would come into a house and behave like that. There is a mistake somewhere, and it ought to be looked into."

"Very well, you had better look into it," said Sir Francis promptly, for the animation in Desmond's manner was something quite new, and he hailed it gladly.

"I wish I could," said Desmond; "but what can I do while I lie here?"

"But you are not always going to lie there, are you?" said his father, checking the rush of sympathy that filled his heart. "It rests with yourself a good deal what progress you make. There is no reason why you should not be put upon a wheeled couch in another day or two, and come into the rooms where we are."

He looked earnestly at his son as he spoke, and Desmond's eyes fell.

"To tell you the truth, I haven't wanted to come back into the ordinary run of things," he said. "I must first adjust my mind to the fact that my life is a maimed one."

"And that is exactly what I don't want you to do," returned his father. "Your life will not be a maimed one unless you choose to have it so. Don't think that I am harsh and unfeeling—I grieve for you more than I can possibly say; but new interests and occupations will come to you in time, and you ought to begin to get a hold on life again. If you think that Chris has been misjudged, try and right her—it will be something for you to think about, whether you succeed or not."

He left it there and turned to his writing, and Desmond lay thinking of what had been said to him; it was unexpected and it was rather unpalatable, but he was far too honest not to admit that there was a great deal of truth in it. New interests and occupations were bound to come, but unless he was ready to meet them they would slip past him again. Since the life that he loved was ended for him he must try to fit himself for the life that he would henceforth have to lead, and it was unmanly to whine over what he had lost when

there were hundreds of other men far worse off than himself.

That was a very salutary hour for Desmond, and though Sir Francis longed more than once to throw down his pen and tell him that he was a dear brave boy, and that nothing that they could any of them do would be too much to make up to him for all that he had to bear, he would not let himself yield to the temptation, and went on rigidly with his writing until a voice came to him from the other side of the room.

"Father, I think that I have been a coward, and a selfish coward, which is worse still. But I am going to pull myself together, and the first thing that I mean to do is to find out the truth of this story about Chris."

CHAPTER XVII

A VISION OF BLISS

It was on one of the first days of the New Year that Desmond was wheeled into the drawing-room; and though it was evidently an ordeal to him to be in the full flow of family life again, he bore it better than his father had expected. Nurse Morrison was delighted with the change, and many were the congratulations that were showered upon him; but Chris did her best to keep aloof from him, and he was conscious of a strong feeling of disappointment and even of mortification, for he had shown her plainly that he meant to champion her cause, and it seemed to him a distinct proof of ingratitude. He could not know that it was that very championship that kept her aloof: unpleasant as the affair had been; it was all over now, and she wished that it should be forgotten. She could not feel angry with Desmond as he lay there, white and weak, with that sad look in his eyes that he tried to hide under a smile; but she thought it very tactless of him to question her, and she was even a little bit annoyed with her beloved uncle Francis when she found that it was he who had shown him the verses.

Having decided to say nothing about Stella, she dreaded Desmond's questions, and on the whole she felt that it would be a good thing when the holidays were over and they returned to their schoolroom

life. But as it happened, this way out of the difficulty was not the appointed one, for as tea was going on in the drawing-room one afternoon, the butler brought in the second post letters, and the first one that Lady Strafford opened gave her an unpleasant shock.

"What an unheard-of thing!" she exclaimed, and then regretted the exclamation, for it was not her way to invite discussion on her concerns. But having drawn public attention to the letter, she could not keep its contents to herself. "Miss Wulstan writes that she is going to be married at once," she said. "She does not even ask my permission to leave in this sudden way; she merely announces that she is going to do so."

"What is her reason?" asked Sir Francis.

"Oh, some nonsense about their feeling that they cannot live any longer without each other. Mr. Venning has got a post on a paper, and wants her to take the place on the staff of a man who has been called up. A most unwomanly occupation!"

"Oh, well, women must fill up the gaps in war-time," said Sir Francis.

"Yes, that is the excuse," said Lady Strafford; "but my opinion is it is only used by women to further their own ends. I thought better of Miss Wulstan. For my own part, I refuse to allow the war to make any difference to my life."

Sir Francis raised his eyebrows.

"When does she propose to get married?" he asked.

"Next week. She asks me to let Simpson pack up her things and send them to her. And she actually says that she is sure I shall understand her

position, and feel that her first duty is to Mr. Venning."

"Well, I suppose it is, if you come to that," said Sir Francis.

"Indeed! I should have thought that her first duty was to her employer. You had better look at her letter for yourself."

She handed it over, and sat in offended silence while he read it. Though Sir Francis could see Miss Wulstan's point of view, he saw his wife's as well, and felt that it ought not to have been so completely ignored.

"Have you any one else in view?" he said as he handed it back.

"No one. The kind of person I want is not easy to find."

"Then don't look for her," broke in Stella.

She had been listening to the conversation with a hopeful gleam in her eye, for she thought she saw a chance of emancipation at last, but Lady Strafford soon showed her her mistake.

"Of course I shall look for some one," she said. "If you were alone, I might have considered some other arrangement, but Chris's behaviour is not such as to make me feel that she ought to leave the schoolroom."

A burning flush flew over Chris's face, and she clenched her teeth in the effort to keep down an indignant retort. Desmond saw it, and would have instantly taken her part if he had not been hurt and puzzled by her conduct towards himself. He said nothing, therefore, and feeling that she was looked askance at by every one, Chris got up and went out of the room.

"I really don't think I can stand this much longer," she said to herself, as she shut the door behind her. "If father had known what Aunt Agatha was like now, I am sure that he would never have wished me to be with her. I believe Uncle Francis likes me, and I used to think that Desmond did, but they none of them want me really, and I should be much better away from them."

Her heart smote her even while she spoke, for the old house that her father had loved had become very dear to her in the last six months, and it gave her a dreadful pang to think of leaving it.

It would not be easy, moreover, to know where to go, and as she sat thinking by the schoolroom fire, she felt that keenly. Then the thought of Miss Luscombe came into her mind, and she wished that she could ask her counsel. She had a general invitation to go and see her whenever she liked, and even if she betrayed no confidence, a talk with her would be very soothing.

She felt happier when she had come to this resolution, though how she was to carry it out she did not exactly know; but as it happened, she was left to her own devices next morning. Stella had told her once that she could use her bicycle when she did not want it herself, but this did not strike her as a very comfortable arrangement, so she had taken advantage of a visit to Kenchester to buy one out of her quarter's allowance. She slipped off, therefore, without a word to any one, and was fortunate enough to find Miss Luscombe at home.

"This is capital!" said Miss Luscombe, as Chris was shown into the room where she was ensconced

by the fire. "I was just feeling very lonely and rather sorry for myself."

"Is anything the matter?" asked Chris anxiously.

"Well, it is hardly worth talking about, but I have a good deal of rheumatism at times, and since it has been extra bad lately, the doctor has forbidden me to walk about for a few days."

"Oh, I am so sorry!" said Chris, her own troubles forgotten in a moment. "I came because I wanted to tell you something; but do let me do something for you—you don't know how I should love it."

"The best thing that you can do for me is to try and cheer me up a little," replied Miss Luscombe. "Everything has been going wrong this morning, and I have not been able to try and put it right again."

Chris had come over for the express purpose of easing her own "jabbing ache," but remembering Mac's advice, she set herself to listen to the woes of another.

"The first thing was that the cook told me the kitchen-maid and the under housemaid are both going off to the Kenchester munition works," began Miss Luscombe. "I would not lift a finger to stop them, for I feel that every one who can do direct war work ought to do it; but both the cook and the upper housemaid are elderly women and not over-strong, and they cannot manage without help. There are no young servants to be got anywhere just now, and I know of no one near by who could come in for a time. That was worry number one. While I was thinking about it, the coachman sent in a

message that the men who were coming over to clip the horses had been called up, and should he try to do it himself; and just as I was starting out to speak to him about it, the doctor came and said I must stay by the fire with my leg up if I did not want a bad attack of inflammatory rheumatism. I really was feeling very miserable, and I am thankful to have you to talk to."

"But I should like to do something more than talk," said Chris decisively. "Has Jenkins ever clipped the horses before?"

"Yes; he used to do it when he had the other man to help him, but now that he has gone I have had it done by these Kenchester people, for I was afraid of an accident if he had only James to help him. It is very awkward, for the horses ought not to be used again till they have been done, and now that the chauffeur has been called up I can't use the car."

"Shall I go out and see what is going on?" asked Chris. "I have told you about Mac, who knew how to do everything. She and I once clipped father's horse, and I have groomed him again and again."

"I wish you would," said Miss Luscombe gratefully. "Just explain to Jenkins how it is I have not been out, and then you can bring me word what he thinks about it."

That was at half-past eleven, and it was not until a quarter to one that Chris reappeared, flushed and radiant, her eyes sparkling, her skirt covered with short hairs.

"My dear child, what have you been doing?" exclaimed Miss Luscombe.

"Oh, it has been such fun!" said Chris, with a sigh of happiness. "They were in the thick of a fight with Ginger when I got out there. James did not know how to hold him a bit, and it was a lucky thing I went or Jenkins's brains might have been kicked out. I was obliged to stay and help and I just loved it; but now I must get back as quick as ever I can."

"You must have some luncheon first," said Miss Luscombe. "Do you realize what time it is?"

Chris looked at the clock, and all the brightness faded from her face.

"Please don't keep me," she said. "I came off without saying anything to any one, and Aunt Agatha will be so vexed with me."

That was only too probable, but Miss Luscombe could not reconcile it to her conscience to send her willing helper back on that long ride through the cold without any food.

"You must eat something," she said firmly. "But you shall start as soon as you like afterwards."

Chris would like to have persisted, but she was so hungry after her exertions that she thought it better to obey.

"You have not told me yet what you came to talk to me about," said Miss Luscombe, as they waited for the gong to sound after Chris had washed her hands.

"I came because things have been going all wrong," said Chris, "and I wanted to ask you what I should do. It seems as if I cannot please Aunt Agatha, and sometimes I think that it would be better for me to go right away. What do you think?"

Miss Luscombe felt herself in rather a difficulty: her sympathies were with Chris, but she did not want to be injudicious.

"It must have been very hard for you to have been plunged into a house full of strangers," she said, "especially when their ways of life are so different from those you have been accustomed to. I quite understand that, and I should be very glad if Lady Strafford would let you come and spend the rest of the holidays with me. I shall have to stay indoors for the present, and it would be nice to have your company."

"Oh, I should love that!" exclaimed Chris. "But I don't know what Aunt Agatha will arrange now that Miss Wulstan is not coming back."

"Not coming back?" said Miss Luscombe in surprise, and Chris found that she would have to give more details than she had meant to do.

She told the whole story, putting it so clearly and concisely that she had come to the end of it by the time that the gong summoned them to the dining-room.

Miss Luscombe was abstracted and thoughtful while the meal went on, but when the parlour-maid had left the room and Chris was about to go, she put out her hand and drew the girl to her side.

"I have had something else on my mind this morning," she said, "but I did not put it into my list of worries because I could not decide whether it was a worry or not. I had a letter from Hal yesterday, and he says that he has been wondering whether he could not do something more for the war, and he would like to use the house as a convalescent home for disabled soldiers; but he knows that I am

not strong, and he feels that it would be putting too much on me."

"Oh, but that would be lovely!" exclaimed Chris, all aglow in a moment. "I said one day that I thought that Strafford Royal would make such a grand hospital, and Aunt Agatha was so angry with me, and said she supposed I was presuming to teach her what her duty was. I didn't mean it a bit like that, but then she never takes things as I mean them."

"I think it is a lovely idea too," said Miss Luscombe, "and it is just like my dear boy to think of it. But it is a good deal for me to undertake, and I don't feel as if I could do it unless you came to help me."

A great wave of joy rushed through Chris's heart at the words. To be with the friend she adored, to be set free from her aunt's constant criticism, to have lonely and disabled soldiers to help and care for—it was like a blissful vision, a vision too blissful to be true.

And then, having called up the vision, Miss Luscombe proceeded to blot it out again.

"But I don't feel that I ought to propose it," she said. "It would be taking you away from your guardians, and it would probably annoy your aunt very much. No, dear, I must get some one else to help me, and you must try and live down the little discomforts. You must explain how it was that you stayed so long to-day, and if you can be spared you might ride over again to lunch to-morrow. I should be very glad to have you."

Her mind was evidently quite made up, and Chris

did not try to change it. If it was her duty to stay at Strafford Royal she must endeavour to accommodate herself better to it than she had done in the past. And with that resolution, she mounted her bicycle and set off to make her explanations.

CHAPTER XVIII

BANISHED

"AND now, Christina, what is the meaning of this extraordinary behaviour?"

Lady Strafford had left orders that Chris was to be sent to the library as soon as she appeared, and since she had expected such a summons, it did not take her aback.

"Miss Luscombe had told me I could go and see her any time I liked," she said, "and as there was nothing particular to do this morning, I thought I would ride over. She was very glad to see me, as she is not well and has to stay in the house; I helped her with one or two things and she made me stay to luncheon. If you had had a telephone I could have let you know."

She uttered the last remark in all innocence, but unfortunately for her, the telephone was a sore point. Hal Luscombe had had it put into his house as soon as the war broke out, thinking that it would be a relief to his aunt while he was away to feel that she had a means of communication with the world outside, and when Sir Francis heard of it he proposed to his wife that they should do the same. But Lady Strafford had very hard and fast ideas on the subject of modern inventions; she had held out against a motor-car as long as she could, she

looked upon aircraft as knavish devices that ought never to have been permitted, and typewritten letters and telephone messages were equally obnoxious to her.

"There is absolutely no peace in a house where there is a telephone," she said, "and it shall never be done with my permission."

Without her permission it certainly would not be done, and Sir Francis said no more; but with the shortage of men the difficulty of getting messages into Kenchester became ever greater, and she knew that he considered that they had made a regrettable mistake.

Chris's speech, therefore, was like a match to tinder.

"That is an absurd remark," she said. "Of course you could not let me know. Miss Luscombe did very wrong to keep you."

But though Chris could bear blame for herself, she could not bear it for any one she loved.

"Miss Luscombe did not know that I was going to be so long in the stable," she said. "She was worried about the clipping, so I went out to see what was happening, and as James was worse than useless, I was obliged to stay and help the coachman. It was nearly one when I went in, and Miss Luscombe would not let me ride home in the cold without having something to eat."

In Lady Strafford's eyes this explanation added tenfold to the original offence.

"Listen to me, Chris," she said; "we must come to an understanding once and for all. I do not wish to go back on what is past, but I cannot help saying that your behaviour to-day is of a

piece with your conduct towards Miss Wulstan. While you are in my house, I cannot have you going on in this independent way. If you had asked me, I would have given you permission to go to the Abbey; but instead of doing what any well-brought-up girl would have done, you take Stella's bicycle, ride off on it by yourself, spend the morning in the stable in the most unladylike manner, and then come back as coolly as if you had done nothing at all out of the way."

The reply was not what she had expected.

"I am sorry that I did not let you know where I was going," said Chris. "I looked about for you, but I could not find you, and Stella was in Desmond's room. I never imagined that I should not be back by lunch-time. And as to the bicycle, it was not Stella's, but mine; I bought it when I was in Kenchester on Tuesday, and it came home yesterday."

Lady Strafford could not object to the purchase, but though she did not show it, she felt an objection all the same. Chris was too independent—that was the gist of the whole matter. It was not suitable that a girl of her age should have the means in her power to buy what she wanted without a reference to those older and wiser than herself.

"I do not wish to speak harshly to you," she said, "but it seems to me that you quite mistake your position in the house. I proposed to your father to have you here out of kindness, for I wished you to have some of the advantages that I knew you had been denied through his misfortunes."

"You are always throwing it in my teeth that I have had no advantages," cried Chris indignantly; "but you forget that besides having a father who

was the truest gentleman in the world, I had a mother who was sweeter and dearer than words can ever say. Every one who saw her loved her, and as for father, he worshipped the ground she walked on."

Lady Strafford winced, but she was not going to admit to this impertinent girl that her thrust had gone home.

"That is a matter that does not concern me," she said. "What does concern me is that your behaviour is far from what I should like it to be; and though when I think of the undesirable people you have been allowed to associate with, I am not altogether surprised, I feel that it is very doubtful whether I am doing right in keeping you here."

"Very well," said Chris quietly, "I will not trouble you any longer. Father wished me to accept your invitation, and because he wished it I should like to have stayed; but if you feel that you are doing wrong in keeping me, that must bring it to an end. Miss Luscombe is going to have wounded soldiers at her house, and she told me to-day that she should love me to help her. She asked me to go and lunch with her again to-morrow, and if you like I can take my things and stay there. I know that she will be glad to have me."

She expected some scathing reply, but it did not come. Lady Strafford was cold and domineering, but she was not absolutely heartless, and she had no intention of turning a young girl out into the street to shift for herself. This plan would give time to see what could be done, and seemed the best means of escape out of the difficulty at the present moment.

"Very well," she said. "I cannot believe that Miss Luscombe will really carry out such an ill-considered plan, but at any rate you can go over there to-morrow and pay her a visit, and we shall see how things go. I am sorry that you should leave my house in any way under a cloud, but that is your own fault."

Chris was sorry too, but since she did not feel that the cloud was of her own making, she did not worry over it.

"It is so much easier to be nice when you are with people who don't think you nasty," was the way that she summed it up to herself, and there are few people who have not found out that truth for themselves.

Sir Francis did not think her nasty, nor did Desmond, but they were both a little disappointed in her, and therefore they raised no word of protest against her going. As for Stella, she was unfeignedly relieved, for she knew that the cloud under which Chris lay was of her making, and she was glad to be freed from the outward reminder of it. So Chris set out to begin a new chapter of her life, and the loving welcome that she received from Miss Luscombe went far to make her forget all that she had endured from Lady Strafford.

Not that Miss Luscombe was unmindful of the awkwardness of any trouble with so near a neighbour and so old a friend, but though the note that Chris brought with her was rather stiff in its terms, the writer thanked Miss Luscombe for her offer to have the girl on a visit, and Miss Luscombe decided to leave it at that and accept the situation as it stood.

That worry put aside, Chris was in her glory.

Her hostess was one of the dearest and sweetest women in the world, but she had not Lady Strafford's practical ability. Chris found that out before they had been half an hour at their work of planning and arranging, and loved her all the better for it. She stretched her young faculties in the delightful task of aiding her. It was occupation for which she had been craving, for after the active and varied life that she had led, her studies could not satisfy more than half her eager mind, and here she had full occupation in the society of a perfectly congenial companion. No wonder that she blossomed out more and more every day. Set free from the curbs and chains that had held her in at Strafford Royal, her nature expanded and developed in a way that was marvellous, and though she was not yet eighteen, Miss Luscombe felt that she could depend upon her as she could not have done upon many an older woman.

"I don't see why we should not take twelve men just as well as ten," said Chris, as they sat deliberating over a letter from the secretary of the military hospital with which they had been put into touch. "If it suits them better to send detachments of that number, I am sure we can fit in two extra beds. I will show you on the plan."

She had drawn out a neat plan of the rooms that were to be turned into wards, and as she made her alterations with quick and capable fingers, Miss Luscombe watched her with an interest that was roused by the girl herself rather than by her explanations.

"You remind me so much of Hal sometimes," she said; "he has a wonderful way of seeing just

what ought to be done and then setting to work to do it while most people would still be puzzling and hesitating. Hal always says that it comes of his being a sailor, but you are not a sailor."

"No, I am not a sailor," said Chris; "but I think that in the early days the people who settled overseas were a good deal like sailors, and I expect that we inherit some of their qualities."

"How do you mean that they were like sailors?" asked Miss Luscombe.

"Well, I mean that they had to exercise the same qualities that sailors do—they had to be constantly on the defence against the aborigines as sailors have to be against the dangers of winds and waves, and they had to decide things in a hurry and be ready for all sorts of emergencies and depend on their own resources. Father often used to tell me stories of what my grandfather did when he first went out to Australia, and his life was just made up of that sort of thing."

"But Australian life is not like that now."

"Not in the cities; but there are many outlying stations where it is much the same to-day as it was sixty years ago. It was like that at Halford Creek."

Miss Luscombe smiled.

"I have heard the story of the miners' meeting," she said, "and of the way in which you managed them. I should think that you must have felt very much like the captain of a burning ship in mid-ocean on that occasion."

"Well, I had not much time to think," said Chris; "it was only after it was all over that I saw what a danger it had been. They were in such a rage that

if they had once started to punish Davis they would not have stopped short of killing him."

Miss Luscombe gave a little shiver, but she felt none of the disgust with which Lady Strafford had listened to the story. The gallant-hearted girl deserved nothing but admiration, and she did not wonder that Chris had found it difficult to settle down into the hard and fast grooves of life at Strafford Royal.

Ten days had passed, and Chris was hard at work on her preparations for the convalescents, when a motor-car glided up to the front door and from it alighted Nurse Morrison. Chris saw her from the window and ran down to the hall in great surprise, but her surprise increased tenfold when she saw that not one, but two figures were crossing the threshold, and that the second of these was supported by a pair of crutches.

"Desmond!" she cried, with a sudden choking sensation that was made up of joy and sorrow, of pity and of pain. He looked so white and wan, with such big holes in his cheeks and such black circles round his eyes, that she felt quite dismayed; yet it was so good to see him again that she did not know how to contain her delight.

"He would come," said Nurse Morrison. "It is the first time that he has been out for a drive, and I expect I shall get into trouble for bringing him so far."

There was a fire in the hall and an arm-chair stood near it, into which she helped him, and then took his crutches and turned to greet Miss Luscombe, who came hurrying in at the news of the arrival.

"My dear boy, how glad I am to see you!" she

said. "But I don't think you ought to have come," she added, when she saw how languid and exhausted he looked.

"I had to come," said Desmond. "I should have come yesterday if it had not rained so hard; but I am much better—Nurse Morrison will tell you that."

"Yes, he is better," said the nurse. "He has really made a start at last, and he will soon be able to do without me and manage with a little help from Simpson. He was determined to come over and see you; and I wanted to come too, because I have heard what a wonderful hospital you are making here. Do you think I might go and look round?"

It was her tactful way of leaving them to themselves, for she felt certain that Desmond had something on his mind, and that he had had some special object in insisting on this visit. She was right, for she had no sooner disappeared than he began to unburden himself.

"I tried to bring Stella with me," he said, "but she absolutely refused to come. Perhaps it is not much wonder, for she must be most horribly ashamed of herself, but still I should have thought that she would feel that she ought to ask your forgiveness."

Chris gave him a startled look, but she did not speak, and he went on.

"She had a letter from Miss Wulstan yesterday telling her all about the arrangements for the wedding; some of it was really rather funny, and she showed it to me and we were having a joke over it when I came to a postscript: 'Tell Chris never to worry about the verses again. Perhaps we should

not be so happy now if it had not been for that passing cloud.' I read it out, and Stella burst out laughing and said: 'I never saw that. Chris need not have been in such a rage with me after all.' She tried to catch herself up the moment she had said it, but I wouldn't let her off, and cross-questioned her till I got the whole truth."

He looked remorsefully at Chris, but she still said nothing, and after a moment of silence he spoke again.

"I can't tell you how ashamed I felt. I told my mother about it, and said that she ought to write and ask your pardon for the way in which you have been treated. I don't think she liked my saying that. At any rate she would not write, and as father is in London, I made up my mind that I would come over myself and apologize for the whole family. It was splendid of you not to tell tales of Stella, and I understand now why you did not want to talk to me about it."

That untied Chris's tongue, and she gave a sigh of relief.

"I am so glad you understand," she said. "I could not bear you to think that I was horrid to you, but I was so afraid of letting things out when you questioned me."

"Well, it has come out in spite of you," said Desmond, "and I am very glad that it has. Stella did not mean any harm by it—I will say that for her. It was just a thoughtless prank. But when she found what a commotion it raised, she was afraid to own up, and as Miss Wulstan recognized your writing and threw the blame on you, she just let it stay there. I think that she has felt wretchedly

uncomfortable about it, but she has managed not to show it. I can tell you that I did not spare her."

He smiled grimly at the remembrance of his scathing reproaches, and then he glanced at Chris again with a very gentle look in his eyes.

"And now I am come to fetch you back," he said. "I know my father would wish it, and my mother, too, though she does not like to say so."

He was such a gallant champion, and he had come to her rescue at such evident cost to himself, that Chris could not bear to refuse him, but she knew that it was impossible for her to consent.

"I cannot come back until Aunt Agatha asks me," she said, "and I expect that Stella would rather not see me again directly. It will be best to let things blow over a little first. Don't you think so?"

Miss Luscombe had kept silence while all this was going on, but when Chris turned to her with a direct appeal, she felt that she must speak.

"Yes, I think that you are right," she said. "I don't say so because I want to keep you here, though I do want to keep you here, as you know very well. But I think that it would be awkward for you to go back until Lady Strafford asks you herself, and now that you know that all is made clear you will not mind waiting."

Now that the excitement was over, Desmond's white look was alarming, and Miss Luscombe and Chris were both glad when Nurse Morrison reappeared.

"I am afraid that you have been tiring yourself," she said when she saw him. "We had better start at once."

"And what do you think of the hospital?" asked Miss Luscombe, as the nurse helped him up and started him off on his crutches.

"I think it is splendid. When Captain Strafford can do without me, I shall come and ask you for a post."

"I only wish you would," said Miss Luscombe. "The nurse who is bringing the patients down can only stay for a fortnight, and the one we are engaging from Kenchester will not be able to manage alone. But I don't suppose you could be spared so soon as that?"

"If I can't spare her I'll come with her," said Desmond, as he settled himself in his seat. "Will you have me in your hospital? I should just love it."

He waved his cap to them with such a brave and cheery smile that Miss Luscombe's eyes were dim as she watched him drive away.

"Poor dear boy, he will find his niche in life yet," she said. "I should love to have him here, but I am sure that his mother would be afraid to trust him to any care but her own."

CHAPTER XIX

BAD NEWS

DESMOND did not come to the Abbey, but it was not the cause that Miss Luscombe had predicted that kept him away. The scolding that Nurse Morrison had foretold awaited them on their return home, and though he would not admit that he had been wrong in going, the dispute and the general discomfort upset him so much that his temperature went up alarmingly and the doctor had to be sent for in a hurry.

"There is no end to the worry that Christina causes," said Lady Strafford with much injustice; and when Sir Francis returned and joined with Desmond in astonished indignation at Stella's conduct, she repeated the remark with even greater emphasis. "I wish to hear no more about it," she said at last, when Sir Francis announced that he should go to the Abbey next day and take Stella with him to make her confession in person. "I am not defending Stella, of course; but the whole affair is very foolish, and the less fuss that is made about it, the sooner it will be forgotten."

"That was not the way that you talked about it when you thought that Chris was in fault," said Sir Francis, making a stronger stand than usual since it was not his own doings that were the subject of dispute.

It was impossible to deny the statement, so Lady Strafford passed it by.

"I have told you that I will not discuss the matter any further," she said. "Christina has chosen to make a friend of Miss Luscombe and to help her in her absurd scheme. It is impossible for private people to run an institution of that kind, and I shall not have Christina in the house again after taking part in it, so we may as well talk about some one else."

"Very well," remarked Desmond from his sofa; "we will talk about Nurse Morrison. She went over the rooms that have been turned into wards, and she is so impressed with the arrangements that she wants to go and help there when I can do without her. But I think it is a pity to wait for that, and I have suggested that I shall go there as a patient, and then she can look after us all together. I think it is grand of Miss Luscombe to give up the Abbey for a hospital, and it just shows how the war brings the best out of people."

It was an unwise speech to make, but he was tired out, and his nerves were all on edge.

"The war is another subject of which I wish to hear no more," said Lady Strafford majestically. And sweeping the world-wide conflict away into space, as it were, with a wave of her hand, she rose and went out of the room.

That was on a Wednesday evening, and on Thursday morning when she came down to breakfast and found the papers full of the accounts of a Zeppelin raid during the night, she refused to show the slightest interest.

"These things are very much exaggerated by the

papers," she said; "they know that nothing gives them a better sale."

When she was in these moods it was useless to contradict her, but her family were slow to learn wisdom.

"I don't think there is much exaggeration," said Sir Francis; "in fact, it is generally the other way. I saw the effects of the last London raid with my own eyes. The German reports are ridiculously exaggerated, but our own never go an inch beyond the truth."

She did not answer, and he knew that she was not convinced; there was no cause for surprise in that, but he felt heavy-hearted when he went off to his study. He was displeased with Stella, he was depressed by his wife, he was anxious about Desmond, and he missed the bright face of the girl against whom the sentence of banishment had gone out. Even his beloved bridge lost its interest for him under these circumstances, and though he had succeeded in getting his model looked at during his visit to London, he felt that he hardly cared whether it was favourably reported on or not.

"But I suppose one must keep pegging away, all the same," he said to himself as he sat down at his writing-table; and then, just as he had taken up his pen, there came a knock at the door and a telegram was brought in to him. "I suppose they mean to accept the bridge after all," was the thought that flashed through his mind, and he tore open the telegram with an eagerness that showed that his interest in his work was not dead, but only asleep. Then all the eagerness vanished away, and a curious, stunned feeling,

came over him, as if he had been violently hit on the head.

"Regret to state that your son's ship has been torpedoed in the Mediterranean and that all lives are lost."

For a few moments it was as if his brain was numbed. Then he murmured—

"I must break it to her. God help me!"

He refolded the telegram and put it in his pocket; then, pulling himself up out of his seat, he crossed the room with slow and hesitating steps. He felt that his face would tell the tale before he uttered a word, but his wife was bending over her writing and did not look up at his approach.

"Agatha," he said in a voice so strained and hoarse that it sounded strange in his own ears.

"And two is forty—and nine is forty-nine," she murmured, her pen travelling up a column of figures. "Wait a moment, Francis. I must finish this before I can speak to you."

He did wait, not because the figures mattered in the least, but because he shrank from the blow that he must deal her. And as he waited he looked down at her, and saw her not as she was now—grey-haired, stern-faced, self-contained—but young and radiant, quivering with joy and triumph as she showed him the face of their first-born.

"I can attend to you now," she said, laying aside her pen with a resigned air. "What do you want to speak to me about?"

He stooped down over her, with his arm about her shoulder and his cheek against her hair, in the way that he had been used to do in the first happy

days of their married life, and holding her so, he whispered in her ear—

"Oh, my dear, my dear! I don't know how to tell you, and yet I must. There is a telegram from the Admiralty—Lennox has gone."

It seemed to him that her heart stopped beating and that she stiffened to stone in his clasp; but almost before he had realized it, a passionate wave of anger swept over her, and pushing him away she sprang up from her chair and stood facing him.

"How dare you say such a thing to me?" she exclaimed. "It is not true—it could not possibly be true. You have no right to say it."

For all answer, he drew the telegram out of his pocket and gave it to her to read for herself, but she had no sooner looked at it than she threw it down upon the table.

"I don't believe it," she said; "it is some stupid mistake. You will see that it will be contradicted before the day is out."

Her eyes challenged him fiercely, and his own fell before them.

"I hope and pray that it may be so," he said, "but I fear—I fear!"

"Yes, that is like you," she answered scornfully. "I do not fear, and I forbid you to say anything to any one of this report."

It was more than a report, as he knew only too well, and her attitude made the whole thing painful and difficult to the last degree.

"I must speak to Desmond about it," he said, after a moment or two of silence.

"You must not!" she flashed upon him. "Des-

mond is the last person who should be spoken to about it."

"What makes you say that?" was his wondering answer.

"Because I will not allow Desmond to step into his brother's place," she said, with a bitterness that shocked him inexpressibly. But he would not let himself dwell on that, for he saw that all this was but her frenzied effort to fight off the blow that she knew must come in the end.

"Very well, I will say nothing about it for the present," he said gently. "I will motor over to Kenchester and telephone from there to the Admiralty. We shall get at the truth of it in that way."

He could have telephoned from the Abbey with much less trouble, but he knew that she would dislike the idea of taking Miss Luscombe into the secret of their anxiety. Perhaps she guessed his thoughtful consideration, for a softer look came over her face, and a less antagonistic note into her voice.

"Very well," she said. "An amended telegram will probably come while you have gone; but if you have worked yourself up into such an unnecessary alarm, it will be better for you to go."

She sat down to her figures again as she spoke, but he saw that the fingers that held her pen were trembling, and though he felt it better to say nothing, he laid his hand upon her shoulder with a lingering touch as he turned towards the door.

He meant to obey her injunctions faithfully, but it was unfortunate that he should come out of the room straight on to Stella, who stood waiting in

the hall with her hat on and a most sullen expression in her face.

"You told me that I was to be ready to go with you at eleven," she said. Then breaking off as she caught sight of his face, she exclaimed: "What is the matter? You look most frightfully bad."

He could not tell her the truth, and therefore he answered her as briefly as possible.

"We cannot go to the Abbey," he said; "I have business in Kenchester."

Since the Abbey lay on the direct road to Kenchester, this did not sound very convincing; but Stella was too thankful to get off the penance of begging Chris's pardon to make any comment on it, and her father's harassed look was easily accounted for by the supposition that he had been having a discussion with her mother over some disputed point.

"It's an ill wind that blows nobody good," she said lightly to herself as she went off; and with a feeling that Providence had intervened upon her behalf, she was particularly cheerful for the rest of the morning.

Sir Francis, meanwhile, had found no comfort in Kenchester; he had known that he should not when he started, and it was not for comfort, but for confirmation that he had gone. His wife must be made to believe the dreadful truth; it must be forced upon her—pressed home to her—until she could no longer refuse to accept it. Cruel as it might seem, it was the truest kindness in the end. And if he wanted confirmation, he certainly had it in full measure, for a further report had been received at the Admiralty since the sending of the

telegram, and the total loss of the ship and all the souls on board of her was established beyond a doubt: "No warning given and no time to get the boats out"—that was the dark story, and with a heavier heart than ever, Sir Francis set out on his return home.

He had no intention of stopping at the Abbey, for he felt bound to go straight to his wife before speaking to any one else; but as the motor swept along the road by the gates, a Bath chair came into sight in which a girl was wheeling a disabled soldier. The girl was Chris, and at sight of Sir Francis she waved her hand in delighted greeting. The chauffeur stopped, and the meeting that he wished to avoid was thrust upon him.

"Our hospital is open, you see," said Chris brightly.

She looked up into his face expecting to see the affectionate smile that was always there for her. But no smile was visible to-day, and her heart sank with the thought that he was going to turn against her as Lady Strafford had done. She stood and waited in silence, and then he asked her a question.

"Can you leave your patient by the car a minute?" he said. "There is something I want to say to you."

He got out as he spoke, and leaving the wounded soldier to chat with the chauffeur, they walked away together under the leafless trees.

"I have some sad news to tell you," he said. "I have been to Kenchester to telephone, but it is only too true—Lennox's ship is gone."

All thoughts of Chris's own concerns were swept away in a moment, and taking the hand that he

held out to her, she clasped it tight in both her own.

"Oh, poor Aunt Agatha!" she said, and he knew from the tone in which she uttered the words that she did not harbour a shadow of resentment for the injustice with which she had been treated.

"Yes, I don't know what we shall do to comfort her," he said. "There are some sorrows that are too deep for comfort, and I am afraid that this is one of them. I must go back to her now. She would not believe the telegram when it came, but there is further news now, and it will all be in the evening papers."

There was utter dejection in his tone and Chris did not wonder at it; it was not only that he was cut to the heart by the loss of his son, but she felt sure that Lady Strafford would be almost angry with him for sharing in her grief. She wished with all her heart that she could do something to help him, and it was with a bitter pang that she realized that the only thing she could do was to keep away.

"I must go back to her," he said, after they had stood there in silence for awhile. "If there was anything to be done it would be better for her, but there is nothing but this awful blank—a blank that will get darker and drearier every day."

"Shall I tell Miss Luscombe?" was all that Chris could find to say, though she was trying with all her might to think of some utterance that would show him how her heart ached for him.

"Yes, tell her," he said; "she will know what it means to us. I could not help stopping when I saw you, but Desmond and Stella do not know yet, and I must go and break it to them."

Chris's longing to go with him seemed as if it would burst her heart, but that was impossible—she was not one of them, and they would not want her with them in their hour of agony.

It was a bitter thought, and it made her feel more desolate than she had done since the moment when she saw the life fade out of her father's face and knew that she was alone in the world. And then, in the midst of her desolation, Sir Francis stooped down and for the first time put a kiss upon her cheek.

"God bless you, dear!" he said softly. "I know that you love us, and love can comfort when nothing else in the world is of any help."

CHAPTER XX

STELLA'S REMORSE

SIR FRANCIS went straight to his wife when he reached home and told her all that he had heard, but she said little, and made him feel that she was holding herself so entirely aloof from him that he could only leave her to battle in solitude with her despair.

He was beginning to feel utterly worn out with all that he had gone through, but Desmond and Stella must be told without delay, and nerving himself for one more effort he went to look for them.

A sound of laughter greeted him as he opened the door, and in an ordinary way he would have been thankful, for Desmond's depression had troubled him; but it jarred upon him terribly now.

"Oh, Father, is that you?" cried Desmond from his sofa. "Do come and look at this. Hal has sent Stella a specimen of what he calls his ship diary—it is all in verse, with the most ripping little thumbnail sketches. I tell Stella that it is much too good to be wasted on her—it ought to be published."

Desmond was still angry with Stella, but he was lonely and weary and he could not keep up his anger for ever; and Stella, feeling herself in the wrong though she was still reluctant to own it, devoted

herself to him in a way that she had never done before. They looked so young—just a pair of happy children—and Sir Francis groaned as he thought of the blow that he was about to inflict.

Desmond heard the groan, and his face changed in a moment.

"There is something the matter," he said. "Give father a chair, Stella; he looks fit to drop."

Sir Francis sat down in the offered chair, and leaning his elbow on the head of the sofa, hid his face in his hand.

"You had better read the telegram for yourselves," he said; "it is terrible news."

He was really past speaking, and handing them the paper, he sat silent and motionless while they pored over it with blanched faces. It was for Desmond that he feared the shock, but it was Stella—careless and selfish as he had always secretly thought her—who staggered and would have fallen as if a blow had struck her to the heart. He put out a hand and caught her.

"Take care, Stella, don't make things worse for Desmond," he said.

But Stella neither heard or heeded.

"Oh, what shall I do! what shall I do!" she sobbed. "He was so angry with me, and now I shall never see him again."

"Angry with you! What do you mean?" asked Desmond, and Sir Francis roused himself at sight of her distress.

She had sunk upon the floor and buried her face in her hands, but he drew her head against his knee and made her look up at him.

"Why should he be angry with you?" he said.

From his past experience of Stella he thought that she would probably refuse to answer, but all her pride and self-sufficiency had deserted her, and she broke out into a despairing wail.

"I never showed his last letter to any one—I was too angry about it. He said that mother had written and told him about those wretched verses, and that she made excuses for me, but that there were no excuses for letting some one else bear the blame of what one had done oneself, and that if any one acted like that in the Navy, he would get kicked out of the service. I was furious when the letter came; but now I shall never see him again, and I know it is a punishment for what I did."

Her voice lost itself in a storm of sobs, and father and son looked at one another over her head.

"I know you both hate me," she said when she had recovered herself enough to speak again, "but you can't hate me more than I hate myself."

"Hate you!" exclaimed Sir Francis. "My dear child, I love you better than I have ever done before. I don't know whether this sorrow has been sent to you as a punishment or not, but anyway you can turn it into a blessing if you take it the right way. I have wondered sometimes whether you cared for anything on earth except yourself, but when any one has once said, 'I have been wrong,' they begin to look at things from a different point of view. I don't want to sermonize, but if we are to get through this trouble we must all help each other, and both Desmond and I have a hard time before us."

He sighed heavily as he spoke, and Desmond glanced at him compassionately; and then suddenly

it struck him that he was now the heir in his brother's place, and he sank back on his cushions feeling appalled by the hard time that lay before himself.

From the very earliest days of his boyhood he had seen how his mother favoured and exalted Lennox, and as he grew older he realized that all her hopes and aims and plans were bound up in the son of whom she was so proud, and he knew that it would be gall and wormwood to her to see some one else in his place. If only his foot had been saved, he could have looked forward to going back to his regiment; but now he would be tied at home for months to come, and there would be no escape from the incessant friction of his new position.

Stella had got herself up from the floor by this time, and with a kiss to her father that had more affection in it that she had ever shown him before, had gone away to have her cry out in the solitude of her own room. Desmond still lay silent, but as his father turned to look at him, he uttered the thought that lay uppermost in his mind.

"Mother will never forgive me for this."

Sir Francis understood him directly, and it was very difficult for him to find any words of consolation, for he knew only too well that the fact of Desmond's inheritance would be resented keenly.

"The estates ought to have been settled differently from the start," broke out Desmond. "I never said a word about it before because it had nothing to do with me, but I have often hated to feel that you were left out. My grandfather should have made you the next heir, so that if you survived mother, a son should not come before you, and in

that case you would have had a voice in all the affairs."

Sir Francis did not answer directly, and Desmond wondered whether he ought not to have said it, but he was reassured when he heard the tone in which his father replied and met the frankness of his look.

"It is not a matter that I care to discuss," he said, "but I can say to you just this once, that I have wished sometimes that things had been arranged as you say. But I have never let it weigh on my mind."

He was silent for a moment, and when he spoke again it was of Lennox.

"I wonder whether I had better go up to the Admiralty to-morrow?" he said. "But I don't suppose they could tell me anything more."

"If only there was anything to be done, it would be easier for everybody," said Desmond. "It seems so awful to go on as usual, but I don't see that we can do anything until we are absolutely certain that he has not been picked up by a passing boat."

"Do you think that is possible?" said Sir Francis, brightening up suddenly. "I think I will go and suggest it to your mother."

"I should be careful about that, if I were you," said Desmond. "After what you heard from headquarters it can only be the slightest of chances, and it may make it worse for her in the end."

But Lady Strafford had already suggested it to herself, and when Stella said something to her about getting mourning, she answered her so sharply that in the old days it would have sent her into a pro-

longed fit of the sulks. It did not do so now; a different spirit had taken possession of her. Her conscience had been at work from the moment that she found that Chris made no attempt to avoid the blame that she did not deserve. Desmond's words and the letter that Lennox had written had stabbed her to the quick, and now that she knew that that letter was the last that she should ever have from her eldest brother, and that he had gone to his death with shame for her in his heart, her defences gave way at last, and she saw herself as she really was. There was only one thing left for her to wish, and that was that Hal should never hear the story, for she felt that she could not bear it if she were cast down from the pedestal that she occupied in his heart.

Chris, too, was going through a sad time; she had not realized how deep her attachment to her new home was until she had been cast out of it. She had thought that she would be perfectly happy in Miss Luscombe's company; but now that a pall of sadness hung over Strafford Royal, her heart was always turning to it. And when, after a few weeks, a paragraph appeared in the papers saying that the body of Lieutenant Strafford had been washed up on the Mediterranean coast and buried by an English chaplain, she felt as if she must go to them, asked or unasked.

The winter days were over now, the buds were swelling on the trees and the flowers were beginning to push their way through the earth; new life was stirring on every side, and with new life comes new hope, however dreary things may be. To Stella, the new life had come in the form of resolve—it had

taken a fearful shock to rouse her out of her indifference to everything but her own wishes, but the shock had come, and its effects were daily growing more apparent. She was devoted to Desmond, gentle and affectionate to her father, and she would have been gentle and affectionate to her mother if Lady Strafford would have allowed it. But to Lady Strafford the new life that was dawning in the world around seemed only a terrible mockery; her sorrow had not softened, but hardened her, and she withdrew further and further into herself as the days went on.

In spite of the short distance that separated the two houses, Chris had never seen her since she went to the Abbey. Sir Francis, Desmond, and Stella came over to see her, but they said nothing of her coming to Strafford Royal, for they felt that until Lady Strafford's attitude changed it would only lead to trouble. Stella had long ago made her appeal for pardon, and the two girls had become friends to a degree that they had never anticipated, but Stella had hard work not to feel envious of Chris when she saw her doing the very work that she had so longed to take up. Nurse Morrison was installed now as Sister in charge, and under her brisk and cheerful sway the hospital prospered exceedingly.

"How much nicer it is to cure people than to kill them!" Chris said one day when Desmond had come over to the Abbey with a car load of books and papers for the men's smoking-room.

"Yes, but you must not say anything against soldiers in my hearing," he answered quickly. "There is dreadful work at times, I know that, but it is work that brings the very best out of the men.

I could tell you stories by the dozen of heroism and self-sacrifice in the most unpromising subjects. It is a mystery, but there is no denying it."

"No, one cannot deny it," said Chris. "You know much more about it than I do, of course, but still I have learnt a good deal from these few men here. Some of them have done wonderful things and yet they never make anything of it."

"They are simply splendid," said Desmond, but in spite of the heartiness of the words, there was a sadness in the tone that Chris understood very well.

"You have not told me what happened when you went up to the surgeon last week," she said. "Don't talk about it if you would rather not, but I have been so longing to know."

"Oh, he gave a very good report," said Desmond. "I am to have my artificial foot in a few days' time."

He did not seem much delighted at the prospect, and Chris did not like to ask him any more, but by and by he went on of his own accord.

"Don't think I am an ungrateful grumbler. I really am most thankful that I shall be able to walk again; but life is so difficult, and when one is cut off from the things one cares about——"

He broke off with such a dejected look that Chris felt impelled to speak.

"I have always felt sure that some new work would be given you instead of the work that you have lost," she said; "and you see that it has come true, though I know how it hurts you to feel that you have to fill Lennox's place."

"Yes, indeed, but that is not all," he said. "I would give all the world to have Lennox back again, for I know how my mother hates to see me in his

place. If I could keep off the subject altogether with her, it would not be so bad; but that is impossible, because the poor dear fellow's death necessitates various new arrangements, and as I am the next heir I have to be consulted. I can see how it goes against the grain with her—if I say nothing she practically tells me that I am an imbecile, and if I make suggestions, she tells me that it is not for me to interfere. I know that she can't help it, for her heart is so sore that the pain is more than she can bear, but it is very hard to feel that I am always making it worse to her."

The words came pouring out, and Chris listened with her soul in her eyes—she knew so well how he felt, and she wished so intensely that there was any possibility of helping him. And even as she wished it, he spoke again.

"Chris, let me tell you all that is in my heart. I have never met any one who understands me as you do. No one else could ever be to me what you are—let us be always together; the world will be quite a different place to me if you are my wife."

It was not until he reached the last word that Chris realized what he meant, and when she did realize it she felt no pleasure, only a horrible, bewildered embarrassment. She had liked Desmond so much and been so absolutely at her ease with him, and now that was all over and could never come back again. She had looked forward in a vague kind of way to being married some day—one day in the far distant future she should meet an incarnation of goodness and wisdom, and the incarnation would ask her to share his life, and she would lean on his strength as they went through the world together.

It was just a girl's dream, but it was very sweet to her, and when Desmond asked her to marry him—Desmond, with his doubts and his difficulties, the discomforts of his home life and his disappointments in his career—she felt as a wanderer in an enchanted palace might feel, who saw the magic glories of the scene fade suddenly at the cold grey touch of dawn.

"You do love me, Chris, don't you?" he said, as he held out his hand to her.

But she did not take the hand, and her face, as she looked at him, was grave and troubled.

"Oh, yes, I love you," she said, "but I couldn't possibly do what you ask. I have never had a brother, and I thought you were going to be one to me. I know that girls as young as I am do get married sometimes, but I could never do it unless I found some one who was all the world to me and a bit over. I want to travel, I want to see things, and do things—I want to know ever so much more than I know now, and I simply couldn't tie myself up like that."

She stopped suddenly at sight of his face, and broke out in quite a different tone—

"Oh, Desmond, how selfish I am! It is hateful of me to talk of nothing but what I want and what I like! But indeed I don't think that I could make you happy while I feel as I do, and it wouldn't help you a bit in your worries, because Aunt Agatha dislikes me so much that she won't even see me. I can't bear to make you unhappy, but I know it would be no good."

He sat still and silent, his face so white that her heart smote her; then he put out his hand for his crutches and got up from the chair.

"Oh, Desmond, speak to me! Say that you are not angry with me!" she cried.

"Of course I am not angry," he said. "You have been very brave and honest, and I was a fool to think that you could care for me like that. Please forget all about it and don't worry about me—I dare say I shall get on all right when I am a little more used to things."

He crutched his way across the room to the door, and Chris stood watching him, feeling as if she were in a nightmare. She longed to speak, and yet she could not speak because there was simply nothing to be said. It seemed to her as if that slow progress took at least an hour, but it was really only a few moments, and then the door shut behind him and she was left alone.

CHAPTER XXI

A MIDNIGHT RAID

"Is there anything the matter, Chris?"

It was the hour to which Chris always looked forward: the patients were in their beds with Nurse Morrison watching over them, and Miss Luscombe, tired with the exertions of the day, was glad to lie on her sofa before the fire while Chris sat on a low chair beside her.

Her tongue usually ran fast enough, but she was very silent to-night, and Miss Luscombe had been looking at her with observant eyes.

"Yes, something is the matter," said Chris slowly, "but I don't think that I ought to tell you about it."

Miss Luscombe drew her hand gently into hers.

"I don't want to force your confidence," she said, "but I want to ask you one question: is it something that you would have told your mother if she had been still with you?"

"Yes, it is," said Chris in a low voice.

"Then I think you may tell me," said Miss Luscombe. "I look upon myself in the place of your mother while you are under my roof, and anything that you tell me will be absolutely sacred."

Chris sat thinking for a little, and then she shifted her seat so that her face could not be seen.

"You know that Desmond was here to-day?" she said, and then fell into a silence that it seemed impossible to break.

"And what did Desmond say to you?" asked Miss Luscombe at last.

"He asked me if I would be his wife," said Chris, "and I told him that that could never be."

Miss Luscombe was not unprepared for the first part of the communication, but the latter took her by surprise. She had seen that there was a great sympathy between the two young people, and the match would be such an advantageous one for Chris that she had hardly thought it could be proposed, without being accepted.

"Why did you say that it could never be?" she asked.

Chris's fingers closed on hers with a convulsive clasp.

"I am afraid I hurt him by what I said," she murmured. "I did not mean to, but I was so taken aback when he asked me. I said that I wanted to travel and do all sorts of things before I thought about marrying, and that if I did marry it would have to be some one who was all the world to me and a little bit over."

"That was decisive, certainly," said Miss Luscombe, with a little smile. "And now you wish that you had not said it?"

"No, not that," said Chris; "but I wish that I had put it differently. There are so many things now that he can't do, and it was horrid of me to flaunt my plans in his face. But even if there was no other reason against it, how could I think of it when Aunt Agatha keeps me away from Strafford

Royal? It would only make things ever so much worse than they are now."

That was true enough, and since it fell in with her own wishes, Miss Luscombe was not inclined to quarrel with it. So far her intuition had been perfect, but now it failed her.

"I love Desmond," she said. "He is a very dear boy, and I hope that by and by he will do good work in the world; but of course he has not Hal's strength of will and decision of character."

How was it that an instant conviction shot into Chris's mind that even if that was true, Desmond's was far the finer and rarer nature of the two? She did not know, and she was most certainly not going to say so to Miss Luscombe, so she remained silent; and the clock striking ten, the maid brought in the candles and the conversation came to a natural end.

"Try and sleep well," said Miss Luscombe, as they mounted the stairs side by side. "Worries and troubles often seem much smaller after a night's rest."

The words were hardly out of her mouth when the telephone bell rang sharply in the hall below, and Chris turned to go back.

"I expect that is Dr. Foster," she said, "but I can answer him unless he particularly wants to speak to Nurse Morrison."

Miss Luscombe went on without waiting, and Chris ran down and took up the receiver. At what she heard she nearly dropped it again in her astonishment.

"Yes, we will let them know," she said.

Hanging up the receiver, she went to the hospital

wing of the house and beckoned to Nurse Morrison as she sat in the central ward, knitting by the light of the night lamp.

"There is a telephone message through from Kenchester," she whispered, as the nurse came out into the passage. "The police have had notice of a Zeppelin raid, and as there is no lighting order about here, they are warning people to darken their windows. I do hope Miss Luscombe won't be frightened; I must go and tell her, and then see about getting a message to Strafford Royal."

"What a pity they have no telephone there!" said Nurse Morrison. "But it is no good saying that now. If Miss Luscombe feels nervous she can come and sit in the little room near me. I shall not wake the patients unless it is absolutely necessary."

She was as calm and collected as if Zeppelin raids were matters of everyday occurrence, and feeling thankful for that, Chris went off to break the news to Miss Luscombe. She did it as gently as she could, but she could not make it other than alarming.

"But how do they know that there will be a raid?" said Miss Luscombe, with a shiver that was partly fear and partly excitement. "Where are the Zeppelins coming from? and what can we do to prevent them from throwing their bombs?"

"We can't do anything," said Chris steadily, "but we shall be safer if we put out all our lights. There has been a warning that several Zeppelins have come from the East Coast and are over the Midlands; they have never been so far west before, but they seemed to be heading this way, so we must be prepared. If they see a big place with a number of lights, they will be sure to think it is a camp or a

munition factory; but if all is dark, they may go over without noticing us."

"You talk as if they were sure to come our way," said Miss Luscombe; and as Chris saw how her hands trembled, she wondered how she would take the next announcement that had to be made.

"No, I am not at all sure," she said; "but we must prepare all the same. I will tell the housekeeper to see that all the shutters are closed, and I want you to stay with Nurse Morrison while I see about warning them at Strafford Royal."

Miss Luscombe stared at her as if she thought her demented.

"We cannot be expected to do that," she said. "They can be warned from Kenchester as we have been."

"I am afraid they can't," said Chris. "They have no telephone, you know, and the man who rang up asked if word could be sent on from here."

"But that is impossible," exclaimed Miss Luscombe. "Jenkins will be in bed by this time, poor old man, and as for James, he is hopeless at riding or driving in the dark."

"I know," said Chris quietly, "and I am going on my bicycle."

"And I forbid you to go," returned Miss Luscombe.

Chris had dreaded that, for she hated to vex the friend whom she loved so dearly; but if it came to a choice between them, it was the Straffords who claimed her allegiance at all costs.

"I am afraid that I must go," she said. "It is a clear starlight night, and I shall do it very quickly."

"But if the Zeppelins mean to throw bombs, they

will throw them whether you take the warning or not."

"They may, but there will be less chance of damage. The shutters are never closed till the butler goes to bed, and sometimes when we have been out late I have seen the lights all across the park as we came home."

There was such a ring of decision in her tone that Miss Luscombe said no more, and in a very few moments Chris had spoken to the housekeeper, had got out her bicycle and was speeding down the drive. She felt no fear and no excitement; danger braced her nerves instead of fluttering them, and she was as cool and calm as she had been when she confronted the infuriated miners at Halford's Creek.

"This is a funny way of going back to the house from which I was turned out!" she said to herself as she flew along over the starlit road.

She had been turned out, even though she had herself proposed going, for Lady Strafford had closed the doors against her as soon as she was gone; and she thought of that rather than of the Zeppelins, and wondered what kind of a reception she should meet with on her arrival.

And then suddenly her mind was filled with her message rather than with its possible reception, for the air vibrated with a strange droning hum, and though she had never heard the noise of Zeppelins in her life, she knew what it was. She had ridden fast before, but she put on the pace now with all her might. As she came up to the gates and sprang off her machine she looked up, and saw against the stars a dark object that moved and stopped and moved

again, poising itself like a hovering hawk. No thought of her own peril came into her mind, her one idea was to reach the house and extinguish those deadly lights that she saw shining in the distance. All was dark at the lodge, so she opened the small side gate for herself, mounted again and tore on up the avenue.

She had reached the house now, and was up the steps and at the door. The hall windows were unshuttered as usual, and she turned off the electric light on her way, then rushed into the drawing-room and saw the family group in the distance beyond, sitting in the smaller room that opened on the garden, with lights full on and curtains undrawn.

They had a glimpse of her at the door, white-faced, burning-eyed, with her hand on the switch, and then the light went out and a chorus of excited voices was heard.

Chris's heart was pumping so hard that she could scarcely breathe, but coming a step or two nearer, she managed to pant out—

"Listen! the engines! the engines!"

"She is quite mad," said Lady Strafford. "Find the switch and turn on the light."

"Wait a moment," said Sir Francis in an authoritative tone. "There is a most unusual sound. Have you had warning of an air raid?"

He put the question to Chris, but it was Lady Strafford who answered it.

"What an absurd idea! There are no air raids in this part of the country; it is a kind of obsession with some people. There is something wrong with the water supply, and I shall send for the men to-morrow. Turn on the light at once, Francis."

But Sir Francis was still guarding the switch, and Chris's voice was heard again in the darkness.

"We had a warning on the telephone," she said. "Will you have the lights put out all over the house."

The words were hardly out of her mouth when there was a terrific blast of sound—a veritable crack of doom. They stood breathless; even Lady Strafford was silent.

"It is too late to start putting lights out now," said Desmond to Chris, and even as he spoke down came another bomb. There was an awful crash—shrieks—a sound of falling beams and brickwork—a sickening sensation of utter defencelessness such as that experienced by the victims of an earthquake, and then a blotting out of sensation altogether.

How long that final stage lasted none of them ever knew, but as the minutes passed away and no further bomb came to complete the work of destruction, they slowly began to breathe again, to move, to think, to feel. It was Desmond who was the first to speak, and as his words rang out clearly and decisively, Chris said to herself that that was how his voice must have sounded when he was giving orders to his men in the trenches.

"Don't turn on the light," he said, "and don't move about till we know what damage has been done. I have my torch in my pocket."

He took it out and flashed it, and as he did so there was a simultaneous gasp of horror: the room in which they stood was intact, but Sir Francis had evidently passed through the doorway in answer to Chris's last request to have the lights put out,

and in the further room a heap of wreckage could be seen across which lay an inanimate figure.

"Father! father!" cried Stella, and would have darted to his side, but Desmond caught her by the arm.

"We must go cautiously," he said; "if we are not careful we shall do more harm than has been done already. It is not as bad as it might be—the bomb has only fallen on one corner of the room, but if we make any commotion we may bring down more of the damaged ceiling. Open the door into the garden, Chris, and listen if you can still hear the Zeppelin."

"No, no, don't open it!" cried Lady Strafford. "You will let in another bomb!"

Without taking any heed of her frenzied words, Chris stepped lightly to the window, undid the bolts and went out into the garden. She was only gone a moment, for a flash of light in the distance showed that the Zeppelin had already flown far away, and as she brought in her report, Desmond gave a little nod of satisfaction.

"That is well," he said. "We can light a candle —we won't turn the lights on just yet. Now, Chris, go out again and get round to the back regions and prevent the servants from coming into the drawing-room from the hall. If it were not for these crutches——"

He broke off there, but the words made Chris realize what it must be to him to have to stand helpless at such a moment. He had just lit one of the candles on the writing-table, and as she looked at him and their eyes met, a strange sense of peace and calm stole over her.

She did not lose it even while she hurried round to the back of the house and rang and knocked and did her best to get in. The servants appeared to be holding the door tight, under the impression that it was the Zeppelin trying to effect an entrance; but Simpson at last thrust them aside and opened to her, and she found herself in the middle of the terrified throng.

She did not scold or argue, she was too wise for that; but the clear voice that had silenced the rebellious miners was potent to allay their fears.

"The danger is over now," she said, "and the house is not much hurt, so we must be very thankful. It is only one corner of the drawing-room. But Sir Francis has fallen, and Captain Strafford sent me to say that you must not open the door from the hall or more of the ceiling may come down. Simpson, will you keep guard over it? And two of you had better come back with me by the garden."

"I'll come," said the old butler at once. "I'm not shaking for fear, it's only that it's given me a turn."

"You had better sit down by the fire and get cook to give you something hot to drink," said Chris. "Two of the maids can come with me. I don't wonder you were all frightened, but you needn't think about that any more—think what a fine story you will have to tell your friends."

That was a good note to strike, and having secured two willing recruits, Chris hurried back along the terrace. It had seemed to her a long time, but it was really only a few minutes, and when she re-entered the room she found them all in the same

positions, though Lady Strafford was talking excitedly.

"You can't possibly know that the house is not on fire," she was saying as Chris came up to them, followed by the maids. "And you let your father lie there without making any attempt to save him."

But Desmond was not to be moved from his firm attitude of command.

"It is because I want to save him that I am waiting," he said. "I have been in too many bombarded trenches not to know the need of caution after an explosion. I dare not go in on my crutches, but the further door is safe now, and as Chris is the lightest she shall go in and see what has happened."

"I should have thought that Stella ought to be allowed to go as it is her father who lies there," said Lady Strafford indignantly.

"Stella can go too if she walks carefully," said Desmond, "but she would be no good alone. Chris has had plenty of practice with sick people, and she will know what sort of state he is in."

As far as they could see from that distance, it was a very bad state; but when Chris had made her way up to him over the fallen furniture, the shattered glass and the débris of the wall, she found that his pulse was beating and that there were no visible wounds. She had brought some water with her from the kitchen, and a bottle of smelling salts that belonged to one of the maids, and with these simple remedies she soon had the satisfaction of seeing the eyelids flutter and the lips begin to move.

"He is coming round," she said joyfully; "we may be able to get him up, and then——"

"I knew that an absurd fuss was being made about nothing," broke in Lady Strafford, her sudden release from a great dread showing itself in annoyance. "He will get up at once if he is told that he must."

She hurried forward into the room before any one could stop her, plunged against the heap of débris in the uncertain light, gave an impetus to a heavy chair on castors, and sent it on to the damaged wall. Down came another shower of bricks, and the two girls who stood by Sir Francis saw her sink on the ground, crushed and helpless.

CHAPTER XXII

A CONFESSION

HAL LUSCOMBE came striding up the avenue in the early morning light. The news of the raid had found him on the point of starting for a three days leave, and travelling with all speed possible, he had arrived at the Abbey about midnight. What he should find when he came he had no idea, as his aunt's telegram gave him no details and the newspapers were hardly more explicit. He had expected that there would be an attempt sooner or later because of the near neighbourhood of the Kenchester munition works, but Kenchester and the works had escaped unscathed, and when he reached the Abbey his aunt met him, trembling and excited, but full of thankfulness.

"It went right over us," she said, "but our lights were out and no bombs were dropped; the patients knew nothing about it till the morning, and the servants were as brave as lions. I am afraid that I was not much like a lion—you would have been ashamed of me if you had seen me."

"No, I should not," said Hal, as he put his arm round her affectionately. "It was your first experience of that sort of thing, and you are not a bit strong."

"Ah, but I ought to have done better than I did. Chris was the heroine—she went off on her bicycle

to warn them at Strafford Royal as coolly as if she had been going out in broad daylight to pick flowers in the garden."

"Ah, well, she has had lots of training," said Hal. "But what about Strafford Royal? They are all right, I suppose?"

He spoke anxiously, and his anxiety changed to dread at the sight of the grave look that came over his aunt's face.

"It might have been much worse," she said, "for their lights were full on and two bombs were dropped. One fell in the park and did no harm, but the other caught a corner of the house, and both Sir Francis and Lady Strafford are hurt.

"No one else?" he said quickly.

Miss Luscombe looked rather surprised.

"That is quite enough, isn't it?" she said.

"Yes, yes, of course," said Hal. "But when a bomb falls on a house one imagines that every one must be killed."

It was to Stella that his fears had flown, but he did not reveal that, and only asked for further details.

"Sir Francis is not much hurt," said Miss Luscombe. "He fell and had a slight concussion, but he is much better already, and the doctor says that he will soon recover. But Lady Strafford was pinned under some falling brickwork and her leg badly crushed, besides a number of cuts and bruises. They thought seriously of her when I was over there to-day."

"And she always used to say that she would not allow the war to interfere with her life," said Hal in a tone that had something of awe in it.

"She has never said that since Lennox was taken," said Miss Luscombe.

"No, but she seems to have acted it. When you told me in your letters how her sorrow made her more unapproachable than ever—how she made Desmond's life a burden to him and turned that poor girl out of the house—I felt sure that she had not learnt the lesson, and that it would have to be brought home to her somehow."

"Ah, well, we all have to learn our lessons from the war," said Miss Luscombe. "I did not at all like the idea of turning the house into a hospital when you first wrote about it, but you are far more unselfish than I am."

"Yes, I like that!" said Hal, laughing. "I coolly write home and ask you to start a hospital while I am snugly on board ship, out of all the bother and worry. I am proud of you, I can tell you that, and I am not going to hear of any thanks to myself when I go round your wards to-morrow. But now we had better be off to bed, for I shall only have two days at home, and there is any amount to be done."

The first thing to be done was to go over to Strafford Royal, but he did not tell her that, and long before she was awake next morning he was up and out of the house and on his way. It was still so early that he decided to walk so as to fill up the time, and leaving a message that Miss Luscombe was not to wait breakfast for him, he set off on his five miles tramp. It was one of the first days of April, and the morning sky was flushed with lovely rose-flecked clouds; the trees were all in a mist of green, and the birds were singing madly as though such

things as death and sorrow were impossible. But as Hal strode along the path through the dew-laden fields, he asked himself whether the peace and beauty around him were only a delusion—whether they could really cheat people into forgetting the awful tragedies that lay behind them.

But it was not his way to indulge in such questionings and speculations, and sailor-like, he threw his scare to the winds and gave himself up to the joy of seeing this dear delightful home of his once more, and of feeling the sweet morning air in his face as he hurried on to tell his tale of love.

For that was the real business that Hal had in hand on this exquisite April day; ever since Lennox's death he had had an incessant craving to see Stella and, as he expressed it, "have it out with her." The same fate might befall him at any moment, and if Stella cared for him—as he ventured to believe that she did—he felt that he should like to know it, and that it would comfort him for her to bear his name and make his home her home. It was not a very suitable moment for the telling of the tale, but when a man lived in the midst of peril and danger and had only forty-eight hours leave, he might surely be excused for seizing the opportunity when it came.

But the opportunity was not quite so easy to seize as he had promised himself, for as he passed from the park into the garden and so up to the terrace, Desmond came out of the drawing-room window and hailed him with a hearty greeting.

"Where are the crutches?" asked Hal, as he saw that Desmond had only a stick to lean upon.

"Gone," said Desmond proudly. "I have my

foot at last, and though I can only limp at present, I shall soon be able to walk. But never mind that, come in and look at the damage."

Hal did not want to see the damage in the least, but he was obliged to follow Desmond into the drawing-room, to look, to listen, to question and attend to the answers, while all the time he was restless with longing for Stella's appearance. Sir Francis was better, it seemed, but Lady Strafford was very ill; a London surgeon was coming down that day for a consultation, and there was a possibility that her leg might have to be taken off.

What a time for love-making! Hal was truly sorry for Lady Strafford, but he was forced to own to himself that his thoughts were not occupied with her, but with the bad luck of having arrived on the scene at such a moment.

"What time is the surgeon coming?" he asked, and he wondered if Desmond would notice and wonder at the relief in his face when the answer came—

"He cannot be here till this afternoon. He has an appointment at Birmingham to-morrow, so he will go on there by an evening train."

"Perhaps I had better be getting back now," said Hal; "you must all have no end to do."

He proposed going, but he meant staying if any chance was offered him, and Desmond was not slow to give it."

"You must have some breakfast first," he said; "it will be on the table directly. Father likes us in and out of his room, but mother is in far too critical a state to be disturbed."

What a time for love-making! Hal felt abjectly

ashamed of himself for thinking of such a thing, and with a manful resolution he gave up all further idea of it for that day. And then—unluckily for his manful resolution—Stella ran down the stairs into the hall, and at the first sight of her face the faithful sailor's heart glowed with a fervour that sent every other consideration to the winds.

What he talked about at breakfast he did not know—one thought and one only filled his mind, and the thought made itself so apparent that Stella grew very grave as the meal went on. Desmond and Chris promptly took themselves off on their several ways as soon as it was ended.

"Come out into the garden with me, Stella," said Hal as soon as they were alone. "I am off again to-morrow, and I want to look at some of our old haunts before I go. I have not said a word to you yet about Lennox."

It was of Lennox that they talked as they walked among the flower-covered borders—life was strong in its rapture of promise, and yet death, though unseen, was all around them.

"And all this would have been his, and now he will never see it any more," said Stella, with a break in her voice.

They had stopped under a clump of fir trees at the entrance to the wood that bordered the gardens on one side, and as she spoke she looked away over the stretch of the park to the hills on the horizon.

"But he gave it up willingly," said Hal. "That is the hope for the future of the world—the men who lay down their lives do it because honour and freedom and justice are more to them than money or ease. I could tell you of scores of men, hundreds

of men, who feel that; they don't talk about it, but it is there and it shapes their lives."

Her look had grown sadder and sadder while he was speaking, and he broke off suddenly.

"I don't wonder that everything looks dark to you now that Lennox is gone," he said, "but I am selfish enough to think about myself too. Do you know what that is?"

He pointed as he spoke to a mark on the bough of one of the fir trees above their heads, and Stella's eyes followed his hand with a wondering gaze.

"It is where the rope of the old swing used to be," she said.

He came a step nearer to her and looked down into her face.

"Do you remember a day long, long ago," he said, "when Lennox sent you so high that you fell out of the swing and bumped your head on the ground? You had a fearful lump on your forehead, but you said, 'Never mind, you shan't be punished, for I'll never tell.' That was when I first began to love you. Your eye was all bunged up and your hair was full of dust, but you were such a plucky little beggar, as straight as a die and as true as steel. I have loved you ever since, and I want to know if you can love me in return."

Her look was even sadder now, and she seemed to be struggling with something that she found it difficult to utter. He watched her anxiously for a moment, and then he spoke again.

"If you tell me that you can't love me, I shall go back with a very heavy heart," he said. "A man gets strained to the topmost pitch when he lives the sort of life that we have to live now, and I have

often thought that it would be like a charm to me if I had your love to carry with me. But if you feel you can't, I won't press you—I know you couldn't say a word that wasn't true."

Her face was quite white now, and there was a look of desperation in her eyes, but she had made up her mind that she would speak at all costs.

"You would not love me if you knew what I really am," she said. "I don't want to tell you—I hate telling you, but I must, and you are not to say a word till I have done. I am not straight and I am not true, and it is only right that you should know it."

He stared at her in utter amazement, wondering if the shock of the air raid had touched her brain; but she did not look at him, and with averted head and trembling lips she poured out the story of the verses and of the way in which she had kept silence while Chris was suffering under a false accusation. She could not tell how he would take it—he might refuse to believe it and tell her that he loved her still, or he might believe it and tell her that he wished to have no more to do with her; but there was misery for her either way, for she knew that she loved him, and that she could not be happy unless she had not only his love but his respect and esteem.

She stumbled along with the wretched story right up to the very end; and then she turned away and laid her head against the trunk of the nearest tree, and let the tears that she had been trying to hold back well up from their bitter fountains of regret.

But though she had made up her mind that if Hal believed the story he could love her no longer, it seemed that he was of a different opinion; for

without pausing a moment he came up to her, and before she could stop him, his arm was round her and his head was bent down over hers.

"I won't say that what you have told me matters nothing," he said, "because it does matter, and we both of us know that it does; but what I do say is that I honour you with all my heart for telling me. No one else would ever have done so, and you would have been quite safe in keeping silence about it. I believe your story, but I love you all the more for being so unhappy over it and for making a clean breast of it to me."

Stella's heart swelled with a rapture of relief, but there was something more that must be told before she could allow herself to be happy.

"You think that I am grieving for Lennox," she said, "and so I am; but what hurts me most is knowing that he was angry with me when he died. He heard the story from mother, and he wrote me a letter that makes me all hot and cold now when I think of it."

"But you wrote and told him that you were sorry, and then he forgave you," said Hal.

"No, I did not. I was furious with him for writing like that, and I would not answer his letter. And then came that dreadful telegram and I knew that it was too late, and that I should never be able to tell him or hear him speak kindly to me again."

She broke into a perfect passion of weeping, and Hal's honest brown eyes were all dim and blurred as he tightened the clasp of his arm round her and drew her head to his shoulder.

"Dear, dear little darling!" he said. "That is

an awful bad pain to have to bear, but you will let me bear it with you, and that will make it easier."

"But you can't love me now," said Stella through her tears.

"Can't I?" he said tenderly. "That's all you know about it! I've loved you for the last seven years, and I'm not likely to stop now. I only wish I could marry you before I go back, but I'm afraid it's hardly possible, or do you think we could squeeze it in anyhow this afternoon? I can put up with a very quiet wedding so long as I know that nothing can part us ever again."

She could not help laughing in spite of her tears.

"Oh, you dear, silly boy!" she said. "As if such a thing could possibly, possibly be! We must wait till mother is better, even if there were no other reason."

"Yes, I suppose we must," said Hal, with a big sigh; "but I don't mean to wait long. I am going to tell you a great secret, and you must not let it out to any one—the Admiral will be moved to another command before long, and as I am to go with him, I am to have a fortnight's leave after Easter unless anything unforeseen comes along. I won't be stopped from marrying you then, so you had better look out."

His tone was fierce, but his look was infinitely tender. And as Stella saw it, a prayer, humble and sincere, thrilled through her heart—a prayer of which she would have been incapable before pain and sorrow came to break down her pride, but which sprang now from the very depths of her being—a prayer that she might be worthy of a good man's love.

CHAPTER XXIII

CHANGES

It was so strange a thing to the inhabitants of Strafford Royal to have its mistress shut up in her room, unable to take any interest in its affairs, much less any part in them, that their steps and voices were as hushed as if death itself were in the house. Sir Francis was recovering rapidly, and though the doctor still kept him upstairs, he was able to get up and lie on a sofa and even to walk about a little. But Lady Strafford's injuries were a very different matter, and though it seemed probable that she would live, no one knew yet what kind of a life it was that she would have to face. The pain that she suffered was very great at times, but it was not the pain that tried her so much as the utter helplessness. That was perhaps the worst torment that she could have been called upon to undergo; she had managed everything her own way so long that it was terrible to her to be dictated to by doctors and nurses, to be restrained and thwarted, denied what she wanted, and forced to do what she dreaded and disliked. The fact that it was all for her own good made it worse to her; if she had been ill-used she would have had the satisfaction of rebelling, but since she knew quite well that it was necessary, she had to school herself to submission.

Her pain and the routine of the sick-room filled up the measure of her days; and since she had been accustomed to give every order and attend to every detail herself, things were soon in arrears, letters unanswered, and business left in confusion.

"I wish that you would take up the reins," said Desmond, as he talked matters over with his father one day.

But Sir Francis shook his head.

"No, I can't do that," he said. "I never have interfered, and I am not going to do so now. It is your place—you may as well begin the work that will be yours some day."

"But I can't bear pushing myself in before you," said Desmond.

"Oh, my dear boy, don't take that up again," said Sir Francis impatiently. "There is no question of your pushing yourself in, because it is your rightful position. All I care for is to have time for my own work—I have never mentioned it to a soul yet, for all these catastrophes have come in the way, but I had a letter on the very day of the raid to say that there is every chance that my portable bridge will be accepted at the War Office, and if it is, I shall have to go to London as soon as I am well enough and superintend the works."

"That will be rather a shock for mother," said Desmond. "Stella was asking Dr. Foster to-day if she might mention her engagement; but he said it would be far too risky, and that she would not be able to hear anything exciting for a long while to come."

"Well, the bridge is not actually accepted yet," said his father, "and even when it is, they may not

want me to begin work at once, so we will hope that by the time she has to hear the news she may be very much stronger."

There was no harm in hoping it, but those who helped in the sick-room felt that the hope was a very slight one. Nurses and doctors alike took a very serious view of the case; Simpson's kind old heart was wrung with anguish at the sight of her mistress's condition, and Chris, used as she had become to surgical wards, found it hard at times to watch her sufferings. There was a chance of saving the leg—that was the real reason of the sufferings. If it had been taken off at once the patient might by now have been on the road to recovery; but the advances and relapses, the examinations and consultations, with all the painful treatment involved, had worn her down until she was a mere shadow of her former self.

When Chris had left Luscombe Abbey on the night of the raid, she had expected to be back in an hour or two at latest, but the spring days were lengthening into summer and no hint of such a thing had been suggested. They could not do without her, that was the fact of the matter, not even Lady Strafford, who from the first had seemed to find comfort in the quick perception that always understood what she wanted, and the deft fingers that never hurt her in rendering aid. No words of explanation had ever passed between them—Lady Strafford had never said that she regretted that she had kept Chris away so long, Chris had never said that she was glad to be back again—but there was an unspoken understanding that was worth more than any words. It was not often that the poor fevered patient was

fit for connected conversation; but one evening, when the symptoms were a little eased, she found herself alone with Chris while the nurses were at their supper, and as the soft evening shadows fell upon the room there was a look of relief on her brow.

"You feel a little better to-night, don't you?" said Chris, as she adjusted the pillows with a skilful touch.

"My leg is less painful," said Lady Strafford.

She sighed as she spoke, and Chris felt sorry that she had put the question, for she knew that it had reminded her of her helpless state and of the doubtful outlook that lay before her.

But when Lady Strafford spoke again, it seemed that it was not of herself that she was thinking.

"My poor boy is always in my mind," she said. "When I am awake with the pain at night, I feel as if I cannot bear it."

It was the first time that Chris had heard her mention Lennox and it startled her, for she knew that not one of the family had ever heard her allude to him voluntarily. Since she had spoken, however, it was better to encourage her to go on.

"I know how you must miss him," she said softly; "but he would not like you not to think of him—he is still as much yours as when he was here."

Lady Strafford gazed at her with a strange expression on her face.

"You thought I was speaking of Lennox?" she said. "No, he is safe and happy, my own darling boy, and since I have lain here in this anguish I have thanked God that he was taken painlessly to his death. It is Desmond I think of—I made light of his pain, and of the pain of the rest of the wounded

who lie out in the cold dark nights, with no one to help them or give them so much as a drop of water to cool their tongues. I would not realize it, I would not admit it, I was angry with the war for upsetting the world, and so I tried to shut it out of my life. That is why the light of my eyes was taken away from me, and because that made me still harder and more bitter, I have been made to suffer in the flesh as well as in the spirit."

She did not exaggerate her suffering, for her torture had been extreme, and only an exceptionally strong constitution could have stood up against it; but that she should look upon it as a direct punishment was a terrible aggravation, and so Chris felt it.

"You are too weak yet to think about other people's injuries," she said. "When you are better you will be able to do something to help them."

"Yes, but I don't know yet that I am going to get better," said Lady Strafford, with that relentlessness that she had so often shown towards other people now turned upon herself. "The doctors think they take me in with their assurances, but I know that things are quite likely to go badly. I have tried to do as little for my fellow-creatures as I could during my life, and I have not sympathized with those who ought to have had my sympathy. Desmond hates me, and I don't wonder."

"Oh, Aunt Agatha, he does not hate you," exclaimed Chris. "How can you think such a thing?"

"I don't think it, I know it," said Lady Strafford, her face flushing with a dangerous excitement. "He never comes near me if he can help it, and why

should he? He knows that I kept away from him, and would not acknowledge his pain."

"But that is not why he keeps away," said Chris desperately. "He longs and longs to be able to do anything to help you, but the doctors were so afraid that you would want to talk about business if you saw him that they told him to keep out of the way."

"Business!" said Lady Strafford, in a tone that expressed volumes. "I have thought about business all my life, and cared for nothing but the successful management of the estates—do you think I can care about it now that I am racked with agony from head to foot? I am only too thankful that Desmond is there to take it off my hands. Sometimes I feel as if I would rather die than go back to it again; for if I go back to it I shall get wrapped up in it, and be like the man who thought of nothing but building more barns for his many possessions, till God said to him: 'Thou fool! thou fool!'"

She was getting more and more agitated, and Chris had just got up to ring for the nurse, when she reached out a burning hand and caught her by the wrist.

"Don't fetch nurse, call Desmond," she said. "I must speak to him at once."

To thwart her would only have been to excite her more, and going to the outer room where Simpson sat at work, Chris asked her to find Desmond and bring him to his mother. She said nothing while they waited, but the tenderness with which she bathed the hot forehead and stroked the trembling hands did something to soothe Lady Strafford, and though she would have slipped away when Desmond appeared, an anxious voice bade her stay.

" I like you to be here, it helps me " said Lady Strafford.

That was a very sweet moment to Chris, and it made up to her for all that she had had to go through in the past. It was a sweet moment to Desmond too, for the hope that Chris would some day return his love was not quenched in the least; it was only hidden away in the depths of his heart until he could venture to speak of it again, and when he heard his mother say, ' I like you to be here,' he felt that one great obstacle was removed from his path.

But it was not of his love that he must think now, for his mother's eyes were fixed upon him with a gaze so intent and eager that it fairly startled him

" Desmond, come here," she said. " I have been asking how it is that you keep away from me, and I hear that the doctors are afraid that I shall want to discuss things with you. I have sent for you to tell you that I want to put it all into your hands; it will be yours some day, and you had better begin to rule at once."

He was so astonished that he did not know what to reply; he feared that she was worse again and wandering in her mind, and he glanced at Chris with a questioning look, hoping that she would give him a lead as to how he should answer.

But Lady Strafford saw the look, and replied to it herself.

" You think I am delirious," she said, " but I was never clearer in my life. I have liked ruling only too well, but since Lennox was taken away all the pleasure has gone out of it for me and I have only felt the burden. I have not been kind and loving to you, but you have never resented it, and I know that

you will do what I ask you, even if you cannot love me."

Desmond's amazement had been growing with every word. Could this really be his cold, stern mother, who had kept him at a distance from her ever since he could remember? Chris had gone away to the window, leaving them together, and bending over her as he sat beside the bed, he spoke softly into her ear.

"Dear mother, I do love you," he said. "I love you and I cannot bear to see you in such pain and distress. I will act in your place for the present, and when you are stronger we will see what is best."

She did not seem quite satisfied, but she was too exhausted to argue it further, for the sudden burst of excitement was followed by a change for the worse, and the night nurse was obliged to send for the doctor before morning came. For a day or two her life hung in the balance, but then the inflammation began to subside and she rallied again. Chris wondered sometimes whether it would not be the happiest thing for her if she did not live to come back to the duties and responsibilities which had once been so delightful to her, but which since Lennox's death had been so empty and meaningless. But it was life and not death that was ordained for her; slowly, but surely, her injuries began to respond to the care and devotion that was lavished upon them, and her sound constitution reasserted itself. How she would view things when she was once more hale and strong, remained to be seen; but she was so far from that as yet, that Desmond felt that the wisest thing for him to do was to act upon her wishes,

and give his own orders and make his own decisions without any reference to her.

Lady Strafford had asked Chris more than once how Miss Luscombe was getting on without her, but when she was told that Stella went over almost every day, she was satisfied and asked no further questions. Now that she was so much stronger, however, there was no reason why she should not be told of the engagement, and though it was not what she had once wished, she took the news very quietly.

"Lennox always liked Hal," she said, and the tears stole down her cheek as she spoke. Stella thought that they were all for him who was gone, but she was mistaken.

"It is very sad that Hal should be in the midst of all that danger," she said, after a moment or two of silence; and that touch of tender consideration made an opening for Stella to communicate her next piece of news.

"Do you think that you should mind very much if we were to be married before you are well?" she said. "Hal writes that he shall probably get leave at the end of June, and he wants to be married before he takes up his next post. I have told father, and he said that I had better talk to you about it. I hope you don't think that we are selfish to suggest it?"

She spoke with an evident trepidation that sent a stab to her mother's heart.

"I am learning every day how selfish I must have been in the past," she said sadly. "The suggestion is a perfectly right and natural one, and the only thing that hurts me is that you should be afraid to make it. But we will not talk about that now;

tell Hal from me that I send him my love, and that he must make all the arrangements with your father, for I am not well enough to think things out."

It was still so strange to them all to settle things without her that they felt as if they were dreaming when they planned and arranged on their own responsibility; and when Hal arrived he had a kind of anticipation that the Lady Strafford of old days would suddenly reappear and forbid the banns.

"Not that her forbidding them would make a penn'orth of difference now," he remarked to Stella as they wandered about the Abbey grounds together. "But I don't want to have to do battle when I come home—I have enough of that on the high seas."

"Poor dear mother, it will be a long while before she can do battle with any one again!" said Stella. "Sometimes I hardly feel as if I ought to be married while she is lying there; but it is not as if I were really going to leave her—when you join your ship she will have me again."

"You are entirely mistaken there, my good young woman," was Hal's cool rejoinder. "You will have to live under your husband's roof whether you like it or not, or he will come and haunt you after he has gone down, down, down, to the bottom of the big blue sea."

He laughed as he spoke, but Stella could not bear a joke just then, and she turned towards him under the shelter of the trees and threw her arms round his neck.

"You are not to talk like that," she said; "it breaks my heart to think of such things, and you might know that it does."

She was trembling and shivering in his clasp, and he could have kicked himself for his thoughtlessness.

"Oh, do stop crying, you utterly dear little donkey!" he said. "I was a dunderhead to say it, and please forget it as fast as ever you can. Remember that we are going to be married to-morrow, remember that I am going to take you on a jollier wedding trip than you can possibly imagine, remember that I have told my two chums who are coming to-night that I am engaged to the prettiest girl in the world, and please, please don't make your nice little face all blotchy with crying."

The nice little face was hidden against his shoulder, and he had much ado to lift it up so that he could see it; but when she let him raise it at last, he looked straight into her eyes and spoke in a graver tone.

"Stella, dear, God knows that I would give just all I have in the world if I could keep you with me," he said; "but that can't be, and so I show my love for you by putting all I have into your charge. Aunt Agnes ought not to be alone, and since Chris left her she has got herself into all sorts of muddles. Nurse Morrison looks after the hospital all right, but there is a great deal besides in a big place like that, and she has not the health and strength for it now. I know it is a heavy load to put on you, but the way that girls have risen to their part in the war is one of the finest things ever seen, and I know that there is not a girl in the world half so clever and capable as you are."

"Yes, there is—there is Chris," said Stella.

"Ah, well, I have not a word to say against Chris," said Hal, "she is a capital good girl if ever there was one; but she has one great and glaring fault."

"I don't know what you mean by that," said Stella, for her opinion of Chris was so completely altered by this time that she could not believe that she had ever disliked her.

"Don't you?" said Hal. "I can soon tell you. The great and glaring fault that spoils her entirely, to my mind, is that she is not you."

He had dried her tears most effectually by this time. And when his friends arrived that evening and were taken over by him to Strafford Royal for dinner, they were quite ready to admit that he had been right when he told them that he was engaged to the prettiest girl in the world.

They said so to Desmond, and he smiled so broadly that they flattered themselves that he was enchanted at their appreciation of his sister. But if they had only known it, he was smiling at their folly in having any eyes to spare for Stella when they might have been looking at Chris.

CHAPTER XXIV

LOVE THE CONQUEROR

THE wedding was over, and quiet as it had been, a certain feeling of turmoil had been unavoidable. The two families were so well known in the neighbourhood, and there were so many who wished to be present at the ceremony—tenants from the estates, children from the schools, convalescents from Luscombe Abbey—that it was impossible to shut the doors of the church against them; but since no one could be put up in the house, no friends or relations from a distance were asked, and everything was done in the simplest and most unpretentious way. A typical war-time wedding—much feeling and no fuss.

But now it was all over. Hal and Stella had gone off for their trip to Wales, and when they returned in ten days' time, it would be at the Abbey that he would establish her before he went to join his ship. Miss Luscombe still loved Chris dearly, but ever since she had known that Stella was her nephew's choice, she had taken a new interest in her; and with the new interest she had grown to understand her better, and to see that just because she was so much more unlike him than Chris was, there was all the more chance of their fitting in with one another and being happy together.

It was quite natural, it was quite right, and

Chris would not have wished it otherwise for the world; but she had been so closely drawn to the friend who had roused her girlish devotion that she could not help feeling a little bit left out in the cold. If Lady Strafford had still been as dependent upon her as in the first stages of her illness, she would have had less time to think about it; but with a return of bodily strength a fresh mental phase had developed, and in this phase her faithful little nurse seemed to be of much less importance.

After the talk that they had had together, Chris had fully expected that Desmond would become to his mother what Lennox had been in the past; but though she put the fullest confidence in him and persisted in leaving him to manage as he thought best, it was not to him but to her husband that she turned for sympathy. No one was more surprised by it than Sir Francis himself, and no one could have been more touched and delighted by it. He had never lost his early love for his wife in spite of all that he had had to put up with at her hands, and now that he saw her weak, suffering and dependent his heart went out to her in a full tide of affection. It went out to her, and to his joy and amazement it did not meet with a repulse; she was not demonstrative—that, she would never be—but she let him see that she wanted him, and he needed no more to satisfy him.

He had not spoken to her about his bridge, for all such subjects had been bones of contention in the past, and he dared not begin upon it; but something would have to be said before long, for the work was soon to be started and it would be necessary for him to go up to London.

"If I could see my way to it, I would go there altogether," he said to Desmond one evening as they sat talking in the library. "I am only just sixty, and I have plenty of work in me yet. But your mother would not like it, and I should not like to upset her in her weak state."

"I quite understand that," said Desmond; "but after all, she is very much stronger than she was, and if you go to London for a few weeks you will see how it affects her. Every man is wanted if we are to win the war."

Sir Francis knew that, but he still dreaded the risk of an upset for his wife, and he might have gone on shirking his announcement if Lady Strafford had not herself made an opening for him. She was able to come downstairs now—slowly and with great difficulty, but still she was trying to fulfil the doctor's desire that she should begin to walk—and to the amazement of the whole family she refused to take up her quarters in the library as they fully expected her to do.

"But all your things are there," said Sir Francis, "and you would be much quieter and more comfortable than in one of the general sitting-rooms."

"I shall not sit in the library," she said, with something of her old abruptness. "All the papers and account-books are there, and Desmond must keep it if he is to go on with the work for me. I shall take the room that was fitted up for him when he was ill."

"What, the little room near my study?" exclaimed Sir Francis in astonishment.

"Yes, I should like that. It has a south aspect."

As it was now blazing August weather, the

advantages of a south aspect were not very apparent, and Sir Francis was just about to beg her not to take a room in which she must of necessity be so uncomfortable, when he was stopped by a warning look from Chris.

"It is not because the room has a south aspect, it is because it is next to yours," she said when they were talking it over that evening. "And I think, too, that she would rather keep away from all the things that she used to do."

"But she can't keep away from them when she is well and about the house again," said Sir Francis.

He could believe that she wanted to shut away from her everything that reminded her of the work that she had loved for Lennox's sake more easily than that she cared to be near him, but on the very first day that she was ensconced on the sofa in the room next to his study, he found that Chris had been right in her guess.

"We may as well keep the door into your study open," she said, as he asked her whether there was anything that he could do for her.

"Certainly, if you like," he said. "I kept it shut when Desmond was here because he was generally in his bedroom, and Nurse Morrison used this for herself."

He set it open as he spoke, and she moved her head to get a glimpse into the room beyond.

"I am afraid that it is rather untidy," he said apologetically. "You won't care to see my things about."

"Yes, I shall," she answered. "I have been thinking a great deal about your work while I have been ill, and I see that I have always been very selfish about it. I am wondering whether you ought

not to offer your talents for use in the war. I was reading an article on Man Power yesterday, especially in connection with munitions and engineering, and I could not help feeling that your light ought not to be hidden under a bushel."

He could scarcely believe that he heard aright, but if ever there was a case of a plain path being made for the feet, this was certainly one, and he resolved to take it without delay.

"I have been waiting till you were stronger to tell you something," he said. "You know how I have pottered away at that bridge of mine? Well, I suppose I must have pottered to some purpose, for the War Office has accepted it, and they want me to go up to town and take charge of the works where it is to be made."

It was a most unassuming way of announcing his success, but he need not have feared that she would belittle it. She realized now what he had given up when he relinquished his career to please her, and now that she had at last opened her eyes to her country's need, she felt ashamed that she had kept him back so long.

She did not say much, but she made him feel her sympathy as he had never felt it before; and as the barrier of his reserve gave way before it, he poured out his heart to her in a way that he had never done since the first days of their life together.

She listened to it all—his hopes, his aims, his desires; and when he ceased she glanced up at him with a very earnest look in her eyes.

"I want to ask you something," she said. "Could we not go away together and make a new home for ourselves near your works?"

"Leave Strafford Royal!" he said in astonishment.

"Yes, I know it would be best," she said. "I have made an idol of the place. I believe I even loved Lennox more because he was my heir than because he was my child. I want to give it over to Desmond, and come away with you and make a new life and a new home."

She was in deadly earnest, he could see that, but he felt that it was so tremendous a change that he was hardly justified in letting her make it.

"I don't think that you quite realize what it would be for you to live in London," he said. "Your health has been badly shaken, and you would miss the light and the air and the freedom of country life. I should have to leave you a great deal, and though you might have Chris with you, you would find it very lonely while I was at the works. Besides, just fancy poor Desmond in this great place all by himself!"

"He would not be by himself," said Lady Strafford. "I know where his heart is, and I believe that there is happiness for him in the near future. I will tell you what I have sketched out in my mind for our life: we have let the London house of late years, but it is coming vacant in September, and therefore we need not go into strange quarters. We have plenty of friends and relations in town, and when I am strong enough I can find some war work to do. I want to give what remains of my life to other people instead of spending it in grasping at my own gains."

"I don't think Desmond will like it," said Sir Francis thoughtfully.

"Then he must take it as his cross," returned Lady Strafford. "I shall talk to him about it to-morrow, for I shall be much happier when it is settled."

She did talk to him about it, and Desmond was at first as much taken aback as his father had been, but when he saw how her heart was set upon it, he went so far as to make a compromise.

"You must not actually give it over to me," he said; "that would not be right and I could not agree to it. But if you like to put it under my management, you must arrange to spend part of every year here, so that you do not lose touch with the place. It will not be very cheerful for me if you go, and I shall be sure to make all sorts of mistakes."

"You will not make mistakes, because you have an extraordinarily good grasp of business for one who has had so little training," she said. "And though I will promise to do as you say, I shall give you a perfectly free hand, and you can make what innovations you please. As to its not being cheerful —any place would be cheerful where Chris is."

He looked up quickly. It was the first time that she had dropped the formal "Christina" in his hearing, but he hardly noticed that, he was so intent on what her words implied.

"I do not know why you should say that," he said. "I asked her months ago to be my wife, and she told me that it could never be."

"I dare say," returned his mother; "but many things have happened in the last few months— things that have changed my outlook upon life, and perhaps they have changed hers too."

He would not let himself think that there was

any chance for him; and yet he was conscious of a flutter of hope. And when he left her to go to the library and met Chris just coming out of the door, he could not help taking it as a good omen.

"Oh, there you are," she said. "I came for those letters that you said I might copy for you."

"Come in and I will give them to you," he said, and following her into the room, he shut the door behind him. "I have just been having a most unexpected talk with my mother. She wants to give this house up to me and go and live in London with father."

A sudden light dawned in Chris's eyes, and a glow went over her face.

"Is not that beautiful?" she said in a hushed tone. "She has loved him best all the time, but she has never known it till now."

That view of the matter had not struck Desmond, but he saw that it was true and he felt its beauty, though he had the less leisure to think of it because his mind was full of something else.

"Chris," he said, "I don't want to worry you, but there is something that I must say to you. Every one is going out of the house—Lennox, Stella, Stephen, and now father and mother. Must you go too? I can't expect ever to be to you what you said you wanted—all the world and a little bit over; but if you could give me just a scrap of your heart, I would give you the whole of mine in exchange."

His voice was full of wistful pleading, but Chris shook her head.

"No," she said, "I cannot give you a scrap of my heart."

He drew a quick breath as though a blow had

stung him, then limped towards the writing-table and sat down in the chair that stood before it.

"Very well," he said heavily. "I take that as my final answer."

But even as he spoke, a hand stole into his and a soft voice whispered in his ear—

"I could not possibly give you a 'scrap' of my heart, but all of it is yours if you want it, for you are the whole world to me now—the whole world and a little bit over."

Those were happy days that followed. A great load seemed to have rolled off Lady Strafford's mind when her suggestion had really been accepted, and she threw herself with the utmost interest into all the arrangements for her new life. There was much to be done, for the wedding was to take place at Christmas, and the London house had to be prepared and Chris's trousseau got ready.

"I wish I could stay with you," said Simpson regretfully, as she was helping Chris one day. "I've always liked you from the first, and I couldn't wish any one better for Mr. Desmond, but I can't leave my lady—she'll want me more than ever now."

Chris would have liked to have her, but there was one faithful friend whom she loved even better than Simpson, and in these days her thoughts turned to Mac again and again. She had written to her at once to tell her of her engagement, and when her answer came she could not help showing it to Desmond.

"Dear Chris,

"I got your letter and whether it's bad news or good I don't rightly know. You say you're as happy as the day is long and that's good; but if

you go and sit yourself down in England we shan't get you back and that's bad. I'd always thought to have you out here again one day and the old place would go mad with joy if it saw you. But perhaps you'd better not come—poor Derrick's dead and Sol Davis is fatter than ever, and living in the Major's house, where I doubt you wouldn't like to see him, even though he has kept pretty straight since you took the stuffing out of him. I wish I could come over and see you, but I'm fair tied up here—Jacky's a perfect limb, I can't let him out of my sight for a minute, and as for Barnet, I can only say that it takes a deal of harshness to keep a husband in his place. Don't you never forget that when you've got one! Jonah sends his duty, he gets handsomer every day and it's a treat to look at him. So no more from your loving Mac, who wishes you the best of good luck with all her heart."

"We will go and see Mac when the world has settled down again," said Desmond.

Chris's eyes glowed at the promise, with the light that he loved to see in them.

"Oh, what a joy that would be!" she said. "It would be sad in some ways, of course; but I long to stand with you by father's grave, and to show you the old haunts where he and I were so happy together. I don't think you would like Australian life—it would not suit you as it would Hal—but I should love you to see something of it."

"Yes, and to understand it as well as to see it," said Desmond. "The war has bound the Empire together as nothing else could have done, but those

bonds will not be lasting unless each part of the Empire shows an unselfish appreciation of every other part. I have thought sometimes that you and I have been brought together and allowed to love each other not for ourselves alone, but for some special end. I am a typical son of the old world, living and rooted in the traditions of the past, and you are a typical daughter of the new world, vivid and vigorous and full of the interests of the present, and from those two points of view will spring the hope of the future. You don't mind my thinking of our love in that way, do you? It does not make you any less dear and precious to me—it makes you ten times more so."

"Mind!" said Chris, with a happy smile. "I can't tell you how glad it makes me feel to hear you say it. I could never have cared for any one who did not think of the other side of the world as well as of this, and perhaps we shall be able to help on the work of bringing them closer together."

"We will try, anyway," said Desmond. "I want to begin at once with having a hostel built in the park for blind and disabled overseas soldiers. I have been talking to mother about it, and we are going to do it as a memorial to Lennox. Father will draw the plans and superintend the work, and mother and I shall give the money to build and endow it. I think it will ease the way for her to come back here again; I can see already that she is taking the keenest interest in it. And when it is started and the time comes that people can travel again, you and I will visit all the Dominions and study the conditions of life in them, and see how they affect the conditions of life at home. Mother is

very anxious that I should go into Parliament by and by, and if that ever comes about, I should like my special work to be in connection with questions of Imperial policy. It is a Brotherhood of Nations that we all long for as a result of the war, and we can never hope to live in unity with other nations unless we are at one in our own household. Ours is the greatest Commonwealth in the world; and I want to use my life in its service, and I know that you will do all you can to help me."

"I should love it more than anything else on earth," said Chris earnestly. "You know that without my telling you. How wonderful it is that you and I should have been brought up so differently and lived our lives so far apart, and yet we should understand each other so well and feel as if we had just been waiting till we found one another!"

"Yes, it is wonderful," said Desmond. "But that is love's miracle, and what is true of us is going to be true of the Empire in the new day that is dawning. We have been told in the past to think imperially and we have learnt the lesson, though it has come with pain and bloodshed; but now we have to learn to love imperially, and with that knowledge will come the true fellowship of the sons and daughters of the Empire which will help to bring peace and goodwill to all mankind."